

Lights in the Valley Outshine the Sun

Elizabeth7

Star Wars

Complete



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Summary

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Alternate Universe – What would happen if Padme survived and Darth Vader finds out? Padme & Anakin Darth Vader [NOW COMPLETE]

Chapter 1

Alternate Universe — What would happen if Padme survived and Darth Vader finds out?

“The lights in the valley outshine the sun.”

— Serapim Sigrist

CHAPTER ONE

“My heart has four empty rooms

Three wait for lightening

And one waits for you”

— Jewel

The procession moved slowly along the main thoroughfare of the city. The people were silent as Senator Amidala’s body passed them.

The current Queen of Naboo pondered the fate of the Senator who had once held the same public office as herself as she walked in the procession behind her body. The Senator’s career had been an extraordinary one. She had been the youngest Queen ever voted into office. The people of Naboo wanted to extend her office beyond the legal time limit but Padme herself had refused to break the law of Naboo in order to retain power. Padme was a true democrat. The Senate had wanted her after that and Padme had bowed to the new Queen’s wishes to represent them there. She had been a good Senator but the tide of change had left no place for a true democrat in the Senate any longer. Padme had lived only long enough to see the ideal of liberty dissolve in the space of one of Darth Sidious’s speeches.

With the Jedi and the Separatists all but gone, Palpatine now ruled unopposed. The Senate was made up of Palpatine’s puppets and was, in reality, an empire ruled by the Sith.

The young Queen wondered whether Padme was lucky in a sense, not to have lived to see all this. She looked around at the faces of the crowds around her. Padme had been their most popular Queen. They mourned her dreadfully. The young Queen knew she was loved herself but Padme had been a shining star of public life. How did Padme’s life end up like this, she wondered?

The Queen watched patiently with the crowd as Padme’s body was put into a small carrier. She was to be buried by the lake that she had loved from the time she was a small girl. Obi Wan Kenobi was to accompany the body there. As the doors closed, a collective sigh went up from the watching crowd. It was to be the last time anyone was to see the former Senator.

“You can get up now Padme,” Obi Wan said quietly once the doors were safely sealed.

Padme opened her eyes reluctantly and looked at Obi Wan without expression. She got up as the craft lifted from the ground.

“There was quite a crowd there,” Obi Wan said with a wry smile.

"Everybody loves a funeral," Padme replied tiredly. "I forgot to ask you earlier, does Yoda know I'm still alive?"

"Yes, Yoda and I are the only ones who do know. The droids have had their memory erased," Obi Wan replied, helping Padme out of the carrier she had lain in for the procession.

"The Queen doesn't know either?" Padme asked.

"No. The fewer who know, the better," he replied. "What I do need to ask you about is Luke and Leia. It would be too dangerous for them if you were with them constantly. Anakin may still be able to sense you are alive and if he does, he will find you even if he has to tear every solar system apart to do so. If he finds the children too, there will be no hope of them being brought up away from the Dark Side of the Force," Obi Wan said quietly.

Padme looked at Obi Wan for a long time without saying anything. "I don't want to be kept completely away from them. I want to at least visit them occasionally," she said in a low, firm voice.

"I'll see what Yoda has to say. If need be, I'll persuade them to let you have access. But do you agree that they can't stay with you?" Obi Wan pressed.

"Yes," Padme said with some of her old resolution. "I won't have my children exposed to what their father could teach them even if it is only a small chance that he could find us," she said.

"Good," Obi Wan said with obvious relief.

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Padme and Obi Wan spoke little for the rest of the journey. After they had disembarked and Padme's trunk of belongings had been taken off the craft, Obi Wan searched Padme's face carefully. "Will you be alright here on your own for a couple of days? Once I have news of Luke and Leia, I will come straight back to see you but for now, I must go and see about arrangements for them," he said kindly.

Padme managed to smile at her old friend. "I'll be fine, Obi Wan. I'm more concerned about the twins for now. I won't rest until I know they are in safe hands."

"They are in safe hands," Obi Wan said reassuringly and re-boarded the craft. "You know how to reach me should you need anything," he called out and then took off.

Padme looked around her attractive apartment set in the side of one of the lakeside hills. It was not the palace she was used to but it was still extremely comfortable. She was fortunate to have been a Queen and a Senator. It had given her financial independence and a comfortable standard of living for the rest of her life.

Slowly she sat down on the one of the enormous, padded chairs and looked out on the lake without really seeing it. What she had told Obi Wan was true; she could not rest until she knew Luke and Leia were as safe as they could be.

As for Anakin... She pushed the thought away. That wound was still too tender to explore.

— — —

Darth Vader shut himself in his chambers and went into a deep meditation. He allowed his thoughts to reach out to Padme using the power of the Force. Once again, they came back to him empty. One part of him did not believe that Darth Sidious had told the truth that Padme and their baby was dead. Another part of him was terrified that it really was true. If he could just get some sense of her presence then he would know that Darth Sidious had lied to him.

When he had first been told, they had to sedate him. The drugs they used were powerful. The Force was so strong with him that he resisted even the physical effects of the strong sedatives. Finally, he had succumbed and they had kept him that way for several weeks. He had lost his opportunity to use the Force to find her earlier.

He had been trying now for weeks to sense where she was. He was beginning to fear that Darth Sidious had told him the truth. Something obsessive drove him on despite the lack of results. If he gave up, he was afraid he might go a bit mad. Endless restlessness drove him on.

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Padme was restless in her new home. The surrounds were familiar to her and she felt as safe as she ever expected to again but there were not enough distractions. Without her work as a Senator, she felt lost. She had been active from such a young age that it was now almost impossible to be still.

Of course, being alone without much to do meant she brooded. Mostly, she thought of her babies. Luke had his father's colouring and Leia had her own. She would miss everything in their lives. She would miss them as babies, as toddlers, as children and as young adults. She would have very little say in their day to day life and no influence over who they would one day become. Padme had always known she would pay a price for allowing her love for Anakin to influence her choices. She would never have guessed that it would mean not being able to bring up their children. She had expected to one day lose her career but she had thought she could take up a private career once that happened. Now she had to not only retire from work altogether but hide like the fugitive she was. She had to disappear. Loving Anakin hadn't just cost her public life, it had cost her everything.

She was surprised that she wasn't angry with Anakin in the knowledge of this. The only person she was angry with was herself. If she hadn't given in to her love for him, she would still be a Senator and perhaps Anakin would never have been tempted to join the Dark Side in order to 'save her'. Despite this, the thought nagged at her that if it was in Anakin's nature to become a Sith, he would have done so anyway. Also, that a man who genuinely wanted to 'save her' would probably not try and choke the breath out of her either.

The memory of the last time she had seen Anakin came to her so vividly that it cut through her brain like a knife and the merciful numbness that had shrouded her since her 'death' fell away. Suddenly she was crying so hard that it was difficult to draw breath. Her own sobs were choking her. She felt frightened by the intensity of her own emotions. She was usually so controlled but she couldn't control the way she felt. She was afraid she would always feel like this and she didn't know how she'd cope.

— — —

On the bridge of the Command Ship, Darth Vader was taking the last watch alone. Suddenly he felt his breathing constrict. The machines that controlled his lungs regulated his

breathing but the choking sensation did not leave him. He staggered and fell heavily into the nearest chair and wondered for half a second if his life support was about to fail when he realized that the feeling was not his own, he was receiving it from someone else via the Force. He forced himself to remain calm but it only took another half second for him to know who it was.

Every sense sharpened instantly and he probed the far reaches of the galaxy with his mind, reaching toward the feeling. All his muscles (what was left of them) were rigid with tension. The thought flashed across his mind like lightening that Darth Sidious had lied, she *was* alive! He felt fury at the lie so strongly that he shuddered and gripped the armrests of the chair until they bent and twisted under the pressure. Immediately after that was the thought that she had deliberately faked her own death and hidden from him. If he had been standing, the thought would have brought him to his knees. It took his breath away that his angel would feel the need to hide from him or it would have, if he wasn't forced to breathe whether he wanted to or not.

Underlying this rush of emotions was the sensation of choking. Why couldn't Padme catch her breath? He made himself calm down and relax. If anyone was hurting her, he would find them and kill them but he would never know unless he regained control of himself. He deliberately relaxed his muscles and quieted his mind.

He tried not to wince as the emotions that came to him battered him like a wave. There was a fathomless sorrow, there was grief, there was regret and there was anger. There was fear too but not the sharp fear that accompanies being attacked by another but a fear borne of overpowering emotions. She was afraid of drowning in them.

He reached out to her with all the power of the Force that he could muster. It went out with laser-like directness, borne on the tide of their combined emotions. He knew the second he made contact; he felt the shock of her mind recognizing his instantly. Then before he could communicate, she withdrew suddenly and completely from him. It was as immediate as a light going out. He roared in pure frustration, leaping out of the chair. He wrenches it from the bolts in the floor and threw it at the heavy doors behind him. It crumpled like foil and slid to the ground.

He knew she would heavily guard her mind in future. He had lost his first and best chance not only to communicate with her but to find her at all. He could feel warm dampness underneath his mask but he could not dry his own tears. It was just as well his face was completely hidden both from his men and from Darth Sidious. He would not have been able to hide his emotions from them but it was essential that he did if he was ever to succeed in finding his wife. From now on, it was his first priority.

Padme was frozen in shock. She had no doubt at all that Anakin had made contact with her. She had felt him as strongly as if he was sitting next to her, talking to her. It was like he had just been in the room. His presence still hung heavily in the air.

Fortunately, her mind had instinctively slammed shut on him before he could find out anything. Her heart started pounding in fear. Had he sensed where she was? Had he had the chance to glean any information, particularly about the babies?

She slowly let her breath out. She honestly didn't think so. It had happened so fast, like a millisecond of time. And yet, his presence had been so intense.

The worst thing was that he now knew she was alive. If Obi Wan was right, Anakin would tear every star system apart until he found her. That could endanger Luke and Leia. If Darth Sidious found out that Anakin was trying to find her, it was likely that he would try and find her first in order to kill her. The last thing the Sith Lord wanted was for his apprentice to have a vulnerable spot in his wife.

Padme knew she was in terrible trouble.

Half an hour later, Obi Wan contacted her via hologram to give her information about Luke and Leia. Obi Wan could see immediately that something was wrong.

"Padme, what is it?" he asked in his soft, well-bred tones, his face creased into a frown.

Padme opened her mouth to answer but no words came out. She took a deep breath and tried again. "It's Anakin," she said finally, drawing in a shaky breath. "He's made contact. He knows I'm alive. Where are the children? Are they safe?" she asked in a rush.

Obi Wan's eyes widened. "What do you mean, Padme? How could he make contact?"

"I-I don't know. It was like he was here but he wasn't. I don't mean physically... but I sensed his presence so strongly that it frightened me," she said, struggling to explain.

"He's used the Force to connect with your mind," Obi Wan said flatly. "I thought he would try it but as he hadn't succeeded so far, I thought he wouldn't be able to. I will ask Yoda to give you lessons on how to shield your mind. How long did you feel him there?" Obi Wan asked seriously.

"A millisecond," Padme replied. "It was like my own mind slammed shut all of a sudden and he was gone."

Obi Wan's frown cleared slightly and he regarded her with interest. "It's fortunate that you're so strong-minded Padme. Still, Yoda could help you learn how to keep up a permanent mind shield."

"Tell me about Luke and Leia," Padme pleaded, eager to hear the news.

Obi Wan examined her carefully. "Do you think it's wise if I give you the details now that Anakin knows you're alive?" he asked gently.

Padme's face tightened into a mask of tension. "Don't tell me where they are just tell me what Yoda decided," she finally said quietly.

"He decided to split them up, that way if Darth Sidious discovered one he would not discover them both. As far as he knows, there was only one baby," Obi Wan explained.

Padme nodded. She didn't like her babies split up but she saw Yoda's wisdom in this decision.

"Leia has been adopted by a prominent family. She will want for nothing and have a very privileged life. She will also be much loved. Luke is with a family that was close to Anakin's mother — I won't tell you where — and will also be greatly loved. He will not be as wealthy

or privileged or powerful as Leia but he will lead a healthy, peaceful life surrounded by people who knew his family well,” Obi Wan said soothingly.

Padme took a deep breath and nodded slowly. The painful ache in her chest suddenly increased in intensity until it felt unbearable. She wondered if her heart would actually rend in two, so great was the pain. She was fiercely glad that Yoda had made such wise choices for her children and that they would be safe but it all seemed so final all of a sudden. With their future decided, there was no going back.

Suddenly the sensation of Anakin was so strong again that Padme gasped and turned around, half expecting to see him standing just behind her.

“What is it, Padme?” Obi Wan asked sharply, straining to see what had frightened her.

“Anakin,” was all Padme could say. Her face had gone white to the lips.

“Block him again!” Obi Wan commanded his face tense.

But once again, his presence had only lasted a millisecond. Padme shook her head. “It was only brief again,” she said shakily.

“I’m going to come and fetch you Padme,” Obi Wan said decisively. “Pack your belongings but not good clothes. I won’t tell you where I am taking you in case Darth Vader visits you again.”

Padme nodded slowly. She could not bring herself to call Anakin his new name but she had noticed that Obi Wan had called him Darth Vader from the time of their final battle on Mustafar.

Padme’s hands shook as she packed some basic clothing and toiletries. Her body was still weak from the difficult birth and the strain had been too much. Would she spend her life packing and running — living out of a suitcase? She checked her clock. She had time for one swim in the lake before Obi Wan arrived. It may be the last time she ever swam in her beloved lake. She was not strong enough to go far but that didn’t matter. She just wanted to be in the water of Naboo one last time.

— — —

Less than an hour later, it happened again. He felt a pain in his chest and at first, wondered if he were having a heart attack. Once more he realized that it was not his own pain he was feeling. Immediately, his mind went out in search of her. He was surer this time. He knew he could reach her. It only took a few seconds and again, her emotions hit him full force almost overwhelming him. Again, he sensed grief but it had a different quality. It was filled with longing rather than regret this time. The feeling of loss and helplessness was profound. Oddly enough, underlying this was a kind of fierce gladness. He tried to pinpoint what these emotions were connected to but again, her mind crashed shut like an iron grill. Tears of pure frustration sprang to his eyes. He felt her emotions acutely but could glean no information from them. Until he knew what was hurting her, he could do nothing to help and that was unbearable. He groaned in frustration but the noise that emitted from behind his mask was more like a growl. His only relief was in destruction. This time, he shattered a soldier droid when it dared to interrupt his solitude on the bridge.

Darth Vader knew he needed to make plans but he was too overwhelmed by making contact with his wife to think clearly straight away. He needed to calm down. He needed space to process everything that had happened.

Chapter 2

Thank you to everyone who was kind enough to leave a review. Your encouragement is always immensely appreciated. I was asked if this was a ‘redemptive’ fic. If you recall, Darth Vader is redeemed at the end of Episode VI in the Canon. In my alternative universe here, perhaps Padme will have something to do with that?

CHAPTER TWO

“You breathe new life

Into my broken heart”

Little Star — Madonna

Obi Wan arrived at Padme’s hiding place on Naboo just as she was drying off from her final swim. She was dressed ready to go but her thick, curly hair was still wet.

“Where are you taking me Obi Wan?” she asked, as they boarded the small transport.

“I had best not tell you until we get there. I am very nervous about what Darth Vader may or may not be able to sense,” he replied, obviously preoccupied by the thought.

“Anakin,” Padme corrected. “His name is Anakin.”

“Anakin is gone, Padme. He is not coming back,” Obi Wan said, regret and disappointment underlying his educated accent.

Padme pressed her lips together and said nothing more. She knew Anakin existed somewhere under all that Darth Vader had become. Not that Obi Wan had spoken much about what Anakin had turned into. All she knew was that Anakin had been injured but was still alive. Obi Wan would not discuss the extent of his injuries which made Padme suspicious. Was he hiding how much harm he had done to his old Padawan? Was he afraid that Padme would be angry with him for harming her husband? Padme didn’t know who to be angry with apart from herself. She had ruined her life and she had no-one but herself to blame. She had made her choices against her own better judgment. Now she was paying for it.

— — —

They traveled for a long time in the small transport. Neither spoke a great deal, even over the simple meals they shared during the journey. For both of them, their mind was far away. Padme was thinking primarily of Leia and Luke. Obi Wan was keeping his mind clear to receive instructions from the mitachlorians.

After nearly 30 hours of travel, they landed on a dark planet consisting primarily of swamps. As soon as the transport door opened, Padme could smell rotting vegetation and damp. Very little light was admitted through the canopy and deep green shadows lay over the dark and foggy pools of water among the swamp trees.

“Can you tell me where we are now?” Padme asked.

"We're in the Dagobah System," Obi Wan replied.

"Why this place?" Padme asked, wrinkling her small nose.

"It's Yoda's home. He had gone into exile here," Obi Wan said, helping her out of the transport. "This is why I told you no fancy clothes," he added, indicating the swamp around them.

Padme followed Obi Wan silently. They walked for an hour over a narrow path of dry ground until they came to a large and ancient tree. Ducking down suddenly, Obi Wan walked into a narrow entrance. When she followed, Padme found herself in small and Spartan living area.

"Come to visit me, you have," Yoda said as he limped from another room, clutching his walking stick.

"Yoda, I've brought Padme with me. Darth Vader has managed to use the Force to mentally connect with Padme," Obi Wan explained.

"Time was all that was a matter of," Yoda said, obviously not too concerned. He turned his ancient gaze on Padme and considered her in silence for a long time.

"I thought you could teach Padme to use a mind shield," Obi Wan said finally.

"Hmmm, teach you mind shield I can," Yoda said to Padme with a shrewd look. 'Problem it will not solve. Problem not mind,' he stated with a shrug. "Problem is emotions. Open a door to Darth Vader in your mind, your emotions do. Scream out across the galaxy, your heart does. Prevent that, we cannot. Is not easily broken, the connection of marriage," Yoda said and with a sigh, limped over to the fire to heat up some soup.

Padme stared after him, unsure of what to say. She looked appealingly at Obi Wan.

"Perhaps training in the mental arts won't be wasted, Master Yoda. I think we have to try everything we can," he said respectfully.

"Never wasted is Jedi training," Yoda replied, limping back to the table in the centre of the room. "Teach I will, what I can."

— — —

Padme spent several peaceful weeks with the Jedi Master in the Dagobah System. He was a tough teacher but inspiring. In his presence, Padme found herself worrying and despairing less. It became a time of healing for her. She was ashamed to be weak when in the presence of such discipline and simplicity.

It was easy for Padme to learn how to shield her mind. For anyone with any degree of intelligence and will, it was not difficult.

Yoda often spoke to her about the dangers of both fear and attachment. "At young Anakin, look closely," Yoda said one day. 'The future indeed, did he see. Of losing you, most afraid was he. His goal, saving your life it was. To the Dark Side, it did lead. Reject him, the Dark Side made you do. His prophecy, it came true. Made his own fears true, he did,' Yoda explained and shook his white-haired head sadly. "Fear, what do you?" Yoda asked her after a pause.

"I'm afraid that he'll find me," Padme said softly.

"Why?" Yoda asked.

"I'm afraid he'll find out about the children somehow and then turn them to the Dark Side too," she admitted with a sigh.

"Legitimate fear, this is," Yoda said. "Avoided easily, it is."

"How?" Padme asked curiously.

"If find you Darth Vader does, tell him dead the children are," Yoda replied calmly.

"Do you think he can find me?" Padme asked.

"Find you, I know Darth Vader *will*," Yoda said with finality.

A cold shaft went through Padme's body. She did not question Yoda's wisdom for a moment. As though he sensed her thoughts, Yoda looked at her astutely. "Have you now different fear?" Yoda asked.

"Yes," Padme breathed, goose bumps breaking out on her skin.

"This fear's name, what is it?" Yoda asked with half-closed eyes.

"I'm afraid of facing him again," Padme said in a small voice.

"The truth, that is not," Yoda said uncompromisingly. "You still love him, that your fear is. Your heart, he again may hurt. Who you love, he may no longer exist. These things, fear you do."

"I guess no-one is allowed to stay in a comfortable state of denial around you, huh?" Padme said wryly.

"About denial, what is comfortable?" Yoda demanded, tapping his stick once on the ground for emphasis.

"You can pretend for a little while that things are not as they really are. It gives you a break from the pain," Padme replied introspectively.

"To heal, hurt it must," Yoda insisted.

"Some wounds are never healed," Padme argued without rancour.

"Accept them then, better it is. To the wound, learn to adapt we must. If go away it not, compensate for it we must learn," Yoda replied. "Learn we must, the pain to manage."

"I just want it all to go away," Padme said, more to herself than Yoda.

"Go away, it will not. Accepted sooner, easier it will be to bear," Yoda said calmly.

"Do you think if he finds me, he will kill me?" Padme asked feeling remarkably calm about the thought.

"What think you?" Yoda asked shrewdly.

"No, he won't," Padme said finally with a sigh. "I don't know what he'll do, particularly if I tell him that the children didn't survive."

"Mention the twins, I would not. A son stillborn, tell him he had," Yoda advised.

"Yes," Padme agreed without enthusiasm.

"A prisoner, he will keep you. Without you, he cannot live he believes. Sadness to both of you, this imprisonment will cause. Changed much is your husband," Yoda said.

"Changed how?" Padme asked questioningly.

But Yoda had gotten up from his seat by the swamp and was limping back to his tree cottage. "Changed how?" Padme called after him.

"Find out you will soon enough," came Yoda's faint reply.

With an exasperated sigh, Padme followed him.

— — —

After 3 months (standardized galaxy time — the phases of the moon, and length of the month and year were different on every planet in every solar system), Obi Wan came back to fetch Padme. He tried a simple test to see if he could penetrate her mind. The block was as solid as a steel door.

"Where are you taking me Obi Wan?" Padme asked in a rather resigned way after saying regretful good-byes to Yoda.

"To see Luke and Leia," Obi Wan assured her.

Padme's heart skipped a beat and then began pounding. "Really?" she breathed. "Do you promise?"

"It can only be for a short time and I don't know when next you will be able to see them but they are both in the same place for a very brief period so it is a perfect time to go," Obi Wan said.

Padme's eyes lit up. Obi Wan realized with a stab of pain that he had not seem Padme look happy since he had visited her with the news that Anakin had turned Sith.

Padme looked at Obi Wan sideways. "You've been a good friend to me, Obi Wan," she said gratefully.

He glanced at her and smiled briefly. "I failed Anakin in many things but I won't fail him in this," he replied.

"Anakin would probably kill you if he could right now, particularly if he knew you were deliberately hiding me from him," Padme stated flatly.

"I know," Obi Wan said grimly. "But I didn't fail him by not allowing him what he wanted but by not teaching him to want the right things in the first place."

"Yoda told me that the Jedi Council had not wanted you to take on Anakin as a Padawan," Padme said quietly.

Obi Wan glanced at her again but he could only see the soft curves of her profile. "I insisted," he replied bluntly. "I see Yoda's wisdom now. I should have listened to him and let Anakin find a different path. With the benefit of hindsight, I can see now that Anakin had

loved you from the time he was 10 years old on Tatooine. He did not have an unattached heart to offer the Jedi. He had deep fears instilled in him during his childhood as a slave and he was not ready to leave his mother at 10 although he thought he was. I don't know why I didn't see what was so clear to Master Yoda. I think I was blinded by his obvious and pronounced talent. It seemed such a waste to leave him on Tatooine."

"Sometimes I think those who believe in destiny are right," Padme said with an unusual moment of fatalism. "If you had left Anakin on Tatooine, we never would have met again. His childish crush would have faded when he fell in love with someone else."

"I'm not sure what he felt for you was childish or a crush, in retrospect," Obi Wan said, his eyes narrowed. "It was certainly obsessive which is unhealthy. If you believe in fate, then you have to believe that you and Anakin would have met up again inevitably in some way."

Padme was silent. She didn't know what to believe any more.

When they landed, Padme looked about her in surprise. There was something about this planet that reminded her of Naboo. It had a similar landscape. "Where are we?" she asked.

"Alderaan," Obi Wan replied. "Beautiful, isn't it?" Obi Wan deliberately did not tell her that it was actually Leia's home. If Vader ever caught Padme, he didn't want their mind probes to find out the children's location.

It turned out that Leia and Luke were together just for two days in order for the naming ceremony to take place. It had been arranged in this way solely to allow Padme to see her babies briefly.

In order to protect Padme from the knowledge of Leia's hiding place, Padme was told that Bail Organa was visiting from another planet but was friends with the Alderaan King who had agreed to allow the party to stay in his Palace for the naming ceremony.

Padme's hands trembled when she picked up both Leia and Luke for the first time since being forced to leave them after their birth. Both sets of adoptive parents assured her that the babies would know from a young age that they were adopted and that Padme was their birth mother. For the entire two days, Padme was never far from either child.

She examined their faces carefully. Luke would be the spitting image of his father and Leia would look very much like her, judging by their colouring. It was painful to look into Luke's sky blue eyes; they were too much like their father's.

From the other side of the galaxy, Darth Vader could sense her strong emotions. He had been unable to establish contact for months now and the frustration had been excruciating. He had had time to rethink his strategy, however. He had been so desperate to make contact that he had crashed full speed into her thoughts making his own presence so obvious and intrusive that she had immediately and easily shut him out. This time, he would be wiser. He would only touch on her mind if he could, and try and stay hidden from her consciousness. Perhaps he would have more time to discover the information he needed that way.

This time he could sense deep happiness as well as an underlying ache. She was happy but she was aware it would not last. There was love there but of a different quality to what they had once shared. The grief had dissipated for the moment but the sorrow was still there.

With great caution he reached out to her. He noticed that a powerful mind shield was now in place — a Jedi mind shield. So, she was still in contact with Jedi remnants, he thought with a curl of his scarred lips. Obi Wan, no doubt. Her Jedi mind shield could not keep him away from her emotions, however. He could sense them regardless.

Unfortunately, he could not get any of the information he needed from her while the mind shield was up but he could enjoy her presence. He had always found it soothing. He still did. He sat in his private chambers for hours, savouring it. When a droid messenger tried to interrupt him with a diplomatic message, his light sabre quickly took care of the disruption.

That evening on Alderaan, Padme dreamed of Anakin as he had been when they fell in love. It was both beautiful and painful, and Padme could not make up her mind whether it made her more happy or sad to remember it all so clearly. When she woke up, she reached out her bare, slender arm for her husband but the bed was empty. His presence had been so strong again but this time, it was only a dream.

With a shiver, she got up to see Luke and Leia.

Padme's friends were glad to see her smiling at the naming ceremony on her second day on Alderaan. Padme, Beru and Bail Organa's wife shared the responsibilities of the naming ceremony, so all mothers were involved. Padme dressed in her old elaborate style for the day and felt rather glad that she no longer had to dress so ornately. In some ways, she had lost almost everything but she had also gained an odd sort of freedom too.

The sun was shining with gentle brilliance out of a clear blue sky and a cool breeze blew in from the mountains that bordered one side of the Palace. Out of the terrace where the naming ceremony was held, there were fleeting moments of real and deep happiness for Padme. She knew without doubt that if she had been able to take care of Luke and Leia herself, it would almost certainly go a long way to helping her cope with Anakin's loss. There would be profound moments of joy to counteract the other grief. Unfortunately, that help was denied her too.

When the priestesses held Luke and Leia aloft to the sun for the final blessing, a deep thrill of happiness brought tears to Padme's eyes. As suddenly as she felt that thrill, she also felt Anakin's presence so strongly that once again, she thought he was standing right behind her. Instinctively she turned, her alarm showing clearly on her face.

Obi Wan, who was standing on the other side of Bail Organa, saw her reflex action. He shot her a questioning gaze which Padme returned with an anxious look. Obi Wan made a subtle gesture with his hands which obviously meant, 'calm down'. Taking a deep breath, Padme forced her emotions down. Would Anakin ruin even these brief happinesses for the rest of her life, she wondered? Her lips thinned as she realized that the answer to that question was definitely, 'yes'.

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Darth Vader had been inspecting progress on the Death Star when he felt an emotion so foreign that it made him gasp. By now, he knew immediately where it came from. With a guttural bark at the engineers, he cleared the deck he was inspecting in order to have some peace. He struggled for a few moments to identify the emotion. It was not until long after he lost contact with her again that he realized it had been pure happiness and joy.

Because he had been so taken by surprise, he had connected too strongly and she had recognized him and withdrawn quickly once more. The disappointment was intense and burned him up like a flame.

He puzzled later over why it took so long for him to recognize her joy. He finally realized that he himself had never felt happiness or joy that hadn't been tainted with some other negative emotion. Even on his wedding day, he had felt anger and shame over having recently lost his arm and having to hide their marriage. When Padme had told him about her pregnancy, he had felt fear over being discovered and worry over her career. Even when Padme had told him that she loved him, his heart-stopping emotional response to her confession had been tainted by fear of what would happen to her in the arena.

Underlying his happiness was always fear. Damn Yoda had been right all along. There was much fear in him. It tainted everything.

Now the heart of his angel was flying upward with pure joy and he couldn't follow her to that place. He couldn't even recognize that place. He wondered what was making her feel that way. He had felt her happiness on their wedding day and at other times when they were together. Once, he had only been able to sense her emotions when she was close to him but the Dark Side obviously had increased his powers more recently.

Whatever was making her so happy, he was jealous of it. He wanted to be the main source of her joy. He would have gladly shared her with their children but if he couldn't be with her himself, he resented anything else that could make her so happy.

He knew he should be glad she was happy regardless. That was the most unselfish thing but when it came to Padme, Anakin was selfish. His love for her had made him selfish towards the Jedi Order and in a sense, towards Padme herself. He could see that now. He was greedy for her and everything else could (and did) go hang.

He paced the unfinished deck of the Death Star and contemplated his next move. He already had scouts and spies trying to track down Padme but with so many solar systems to explore, it could take years. His gloved, mechanical hands clenched in frustration. There was nothing more he could do and he knew it.

Once again, Darth Vader did not sleep that night.

Chapter 3

CHAPTER THREE

“Take my hand and tell me what you’re feeling
Touch my lips and hear the words I’m telling you
Give your trust to me and look into my heart
And tell me, oh tell me what you’re thinking
So sit on top of the world and tell me what you’re feeling
What you feel, is what I feel for you
Take my hand and if I’m lying to you
I’ll always be alone, if I’m lying to you”
Take My Hand, Dido

A deep depression settled over Padme like a shroud when she had to leave Luke and Leia behind on Alderaan. She deliberately did not allow herself to think about it but her mind felt paralysed anyway.

“I need work to do Obi Wan,” she told him as they took off. Bail Organa and his wife, Owen and Beru were waving to them down below as they left from a grassy plain on the palace’s land.

“The Rebel Alliance could probably use your help a great deal but if Darth Vader finds you, he would use a mind probe on you. Everything that the Alliance is doing would become an open book to him,” Obi Wan said. “It’s too dangerous.”

“I could work on education programs to develop political leaders but diplomacy is no longer relevant in the galaxy it seems. What use is diplomacy in an Empire?” she said bitterly.

Obi Wan examined her profile carefully. “That sounds like a good idea to me, Padme. Except perhaps your diplomatic training and experience could be used to help educate young spies for the Alliance,” he said slowly, thinking it through.

“Wouldn’t that then be dangerous information for Darth Vader to have?” Padme asked, her voice still sounding a bit hard around the edges.

“You could develop general principles rather than specific strategies. That way, if Darth Vader does capture you, all he would learn is the skills education they are receiving rather than our actual plans,” Obi Wan explained, still lost in consideration of the idea.

After a pause, Padme said, “it’s an excellent idea.” Suddenly, Padme felt a rush of hope. A sense of purpose had always been important to her identity. Now that was restored, she felt more like herself. “An excellent idea,” she repeated with a smile.

"I'm taking you back to Naboo. Darth Vader's spies have already scoured the planet and left. As far as he knows, you haven't chosen your old home as a hiding place so for now, it is probably the safest place. We will probably still have to move you every three to six months," Obi Wan said.

Padme started in surprise. Anakin's spies had already been on Naboo? It had only taken a few days for him to start searching. Padme sighed, she should have known that Anakin would be ruthlessly efficient and waste no time.

"Where will you be, Obi Wan?" Padme asked curiously.

"I won't tell you for the usual reasons but I will in the same place as Luke, watching over him," Obi Wan said reassuringly.

Padme sighed with relief. "I'm so glad to hear that," she said. "Leia has wealth and power to protect her but Luke did seem vulnerable. I won't worry about him so much if I know you are near to him."

Obi Wan smiled. Padme's faith in him was touching but he feared that one Jedi may not be enough to stop the power of Darth Sidious and Darth Vader should they learn of Luke's existence. The whole might of the Empire would be brought to bear and not even Yoda could withstand that.

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Padme gradually fell into a routine in her hillside apartment. She never settled down completely however, as she may have to leave at a moment's notice. She spent hours every day developing the training program for the young Rebel Alliance troops. Because of her military training as well as her political training, Padme was able to develop skill units for both fighting techniques as well as diplomacy. All diplomats were essentially spies anyway, she thought to herself with a small smile.

It was absorbing work and filled in her days easily. While she was working, she was content. She felt useful. When she had to stop at the end of the day, she was restless and listless. She often didn't sleep well and sometimes would go paddling in the lake late at night with only the light of the moon.

After her busy public life, the solitude was strange but a relief as well. It felt odd not to be on show 24 hours a day. She was learning the delights of not having to get dressed up every day and choosing her own routine. She could eat when she liked, sleep when she liked, exercise when she wanted to and work as many or little hours as she chose.

She thought of Luke and Leia most often because they were easier to think of than Anakin. Bail and Owen both sent regular holograms of Leia and Luke, almost every day. Bail's wife and Beru would usually report every few days on how the babies were going. Padme was relieved to realize that she would not miss as much as she originally thought. Still, she could not hold her own children and that was devastating. She would send back messages to the babies and the families generally but knew Leia and Luke were too little to do much more than recognize her voice.

Most of all, Padme concentrated on keeping her emotions under control. If they were the doorway for Anakin to enter her mind, the more balanced her emotions the better.

In his private apartments on the Command Ship, Anakin was trying once again to reach Padme through the Force. Again, his mental searches of the galaxy came back to him empty. His spies had reported rumours of Jedi sightings but they were unlikely to be true. He had told them to follow up any leads regardless. The search of Naboo had been fruitless. He had suspected her home planet was too obvious a place for her to hide.

He knew the few weeks since he last connected with her was an unrealistic timeframe for his spy network to have made much progress but the frustration was still extreme. He knew patience would eventually gain for him what he wanted but Anakin had never been patient.

He never stopped to question himself what he would actually say or do when he found her. Padme was his wife and should be with him — that was his only thought.

Of Darth Sidious, he had murderous thoughts. The Sith Lord had tricked Anakin into joining the Dark Side by playing on his fears for his wife, all the while knowing that it was Anakin's defection that would cause him to lose her. Then he had lied about Padme being dead. He knew he hadn't killed her that day of Mustafar. He was not such an amateur with the Force that he didn't know when someone was alive or dead. His sense of shame over the loss of his temper and lashing out at his wife cut him deeply. He leaned over the table in his private apartments and his breath rasped as the memory came back to him clearly.

He had never thought himself capable of harming a hair on her head. Padme's talk of Obi Wan had infuriated him and aroused his jealousy. Why would she listen to Obi Wan rather than himself? When he had tried to explain his reasons, she had sided with Obi Wan. Then to see Obi Wan standing in the doorway of her spaceship tipped him over the edge. Not only was she siding with his old Master but she had brought him with her. She had joined forces with Obi Wan against him, her own husband! Red had washed over his vision in an instant. He felt betrayed. He felt like his heart was being ripped in two by her duplicity. He didn't even remember when he reached out to choke her. He only knew when Obi Wan approached him, he had to let go in order to arm himself. He had known she was still alive when he let go.

Darth Sidious probably thought that telling him Padme was dead would eliminate his new apprentice's last vulnerability. Then again, Darth Sidious had never loved. It was not in him to love. This ignorance was a weakness in his psychological make up that Anakin suddenly realized he could exploit. He could not guess what Anakin's actions would be if he knew that Anakin had discovered his wife was still alive. He could not guess because he had never felt as Anakin now felt. Darth Sidious' knowledge was incomplete. He may know the Dark Side of the Force thoroughly but he didn't know the power of love.

Approximately one month after coming back to Naboo, Padme felt more than usually restless. She tossed and turned in her bed and with a sign of resignation, she got up to go for one of her occasional midnight swims.

It had been a hot day and the water was still warm enough to be pleasant. She set a small lantern on one of the rocks on the beach to orient herself by and then waded out into the calm water.

Her soul couldn't find a place to cling to tonight. Not even seeing Luke and Leia via hologram today had calmed her agitation. She had found a peaceful routine and some sense of purpose in her days but the future looked blank to her. What would she do with herself after the education units were finished? They would only take a year at the most. She didn't need to worry about money but where would she invest her energy for the rest of her life? She knew she would always be on the run, so she could not devote herself to a community again.

It was the horrible blankness of her future that bothered her. She could not see even the next step. She could not have ambitions and her love was lost to her. She did not even have a home now. She had nothing to cling to, not even hope.

A thought came unbidden into her mind. She wished Anakin's dream had been right. She almost wished she had died in childbirth. Anything was better than this terrible void before her. She didn't want to cry out there in the water. Staying afloat and crying worked at cross purposes to each other. She swam quickly back to shore and in the shallows, she cried for the first time in many weeks.

Inevitably, soon after her emotions scorched through her, she could feel Anakin as close as a breath away from her. For the first time, she didn't care. Let him feel whatever he wanted to. He knew by now that she was alive and she also knew he couldn't get into any part of her mind that she chose not to allow him into. It would do him no good to spy on her emotions, no good at all.

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Anakin lifted his head suddenly. There she was again. He was sure she was crying. He recoiled from the strength of her emotions. He leaned against the wall of the corridor on the Command Ship. He had been on his way to the bridge. Tentatively he used the Force to see what he could find out. She was definitely in pain but from what? To his surprise, she didn't slam down her defenses immediately. He sensed resignation at his presence for the first time. He felt relieved. These days, he only seemed to live for these brief moments of contact. Ruling the Empire had almost lost its interest for him. To be shut out from her presence so quickly was worse than one of Darth Sidious' punishments.

He tried to enter her thoughts but they were still blocked from him. He sensed despair for the first time and a desire... a desire for *death*? "No," Anakin muttered to himself, nothing but a low sound emanating from his mask. Why would she want to die, he wondered in bafflement? If she no longer loved him then she had her wish, he was out of her life; at least, for now. If she did still love him, she only had to let him know where she was and he would be there as fast as any ship in the Galaxy could take him.

He concentrated fiercely on the tenuous link he had to her. He sensed a feeling of... blankness. She was in despair over her future, he suddenly realized. She seemed to feel that she had no future.

She could be an Empress, Anakin thought in amazement. Had she forgotten what he had said to her of his plans for them on Mustafar? She could rule the entire Galaxy by his side and make all the just and fair laws she wished. He would not interfere with her decisions. He was a Master of the Force, not a politician or a law maker. He would trust her with anything and everything in his Empire.

He noticed a sudden shift in Padme's feelings. He got the impression that someone had arrived unexpectedly, someone that Padme trusted. For a split second, her mind shield slipped a crack and Anakin suddenly realized that Obi Wan had arrived wherever Padme was.

Rage began to build like black cloud. He could feel it coursing through what was left of his veins. Why was Obi Wan visiting his wife? Why was Padme so glad to see him? How often did his old Master visit her? His fury was so great that he was no longer able to control his connection to Padme and he sensed that she had abruptly and powerfully felt his anger.

He nearly short-circuited his life support when he realized his greatest enemy could visit his wife whenever he chose and be welcomed but he himself, her husband, did not even know where she was. A few seconds later, one of his Generals found Darth Vader slumped on the floor struggling to breathe. He took him to the pressurized medical capsule immediately.

"Do you know how some of your circuitry came to be melted, my Lord?" the droid doctor asked.

"Yes," Anakin replied through clenched teeth.

"Well, well. I think it would be best to avoid whatever caused it in future," it said with its programmed bed-side manner.

"I agree," Anakin replied and promised himself that next time he crossed Obi Wan's path, he would kill him.

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Padme saw Obi Wan's transport land on the sand of the beach. Quickly, she ran up to shore and pulled on her robe over her swim suit and waited to meet him. "Obi Wan! How are you?" she asked, grateful to see a friend's face. It had pulled her out of her despair. She was glad it was too dark for him to see that she had been crying.

"I saw your light on!" Obi Wan joked, pointing at the small lantern on the rock.

Padme laughed. "Come inside for a hot drink," she invited. Before she had taken two steps, she suddenly fell down in the sand and then put her arms up as if to defend herself.

"Padme!" Obi Wan said in alarm, reaching for his light sabre.

"It's Anakin, he's furious!" Padme said, fear coursing through her voice.

Immediately her defenses crashed closed and he was gone again. "I forgot for a moment that he had been hanging around again," she whispered, as the impression faded. 'He wanted to kill somebody, I could feel it,' Padme said, her eyes wide. "It's the first time I've felt *his* emotions."

Obi Wan did not like the sound of that development. "I daresay Darth Vader wants to kill somebody every five seconds or so," he said flippantly. "I don't believe the Sith value life very much."

Padme just stared at him for a few seconds. "Come inside for a hot drink," she finally repeated and walked slowly up the stone path to her apartment.

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"What brings you here?" Padme asked, putting a cup of steaming herbal tea in front of Obi Wan. "Not that I'm not glad to see you or anything but I imagine watching over Luke takes up most of your time."

"Yoda sent me a message. He wants you to go back to the Dagobah system. He no longer believes Naboo is safe," Obi Wan said.

"Why didn't he contact me direct and tell me to go back?" Padme asked with a smile. "After all, I can fly too."

"He wanted me to accompany you. He prefers you to travel accompanied at the moment," Obi Wan explained gently.

Padme nodded. "Did Yoda say why he thought Naboo was no longer safe?" she asked.

"Just a feeling he has, I think," Obi Wan replied. "Nothing definite."

"It won't take me long to pack. I won't hold you up," Padme promised and went to her room to pack once again.

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"Why did you bring me back here, Yoda?" Padme asked the ancient Jedi Master after she had settled in again and said good-bye to Obi Wan.

"Tell me things, the Force does. Not safe for you, Naboo is," Yoda replied. "Also, company you need. Brooding too much, not good for you. Peace you will find here with me. Come a time there may, when glad you are of the rest. Less likely it is, your emotions to overwhelm you here with me."

Padme knew Yoda was right.

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Thus began the longest and most frustrating year of Darth Vader's life. He lost track of Padme completely. A couple of months after the circuitry in his life support was rebuilt, he sent another spy force to Naboo. This time they found traces of her, not in the Palace but on the other side of the lake in a small but comfortable hillside apartment. They brought back the few possessions they had found to Darth Vader and were gratified to be rewarded handsomely for their success.

Anakin had recognized the small stole with distinctive embroidery immediately and the scent of her perfume still lingered on the fabric. It had been found under the bed where it must have fallen unnoticed. She had obviously packed in a hurry. A beautiful filigree patterned pen had also been found on the floor near the table. He recognized it as one that she had been given by a diplomatic delegation from the Onshlogo system when she was Queen of Naboo. It was valuable and he knew she would be upset to lose it. He would return it to her when he found her.

He folded the stole carefully and kept it locked up with the pen with his own few personal possessions.

His spy system grew during that year but apart from the few traces of her from Naboo, they drew a complete blank. Anakin cursed himself for not making a thorough check of

Naboo as soon as he knew she was still alive. He should have left a guard of spies there permanently too — a measure he had now taken.

The year passed with aching slowness. He wondered how many years he would have like this until he saw her again. He never doubted that he would find her. It was a possibility his mind did not accept.

Meanwhile, work continued apace on the Death Star. His time was full in over-seeing the construction and crushing any trouble spots in the Galaxy before they could grow into a real problem. Darth Sidious was still imparting knowledge to his apprentice but did not spend much time at the Command Ship or the Death Star. He left those projects in Darth Vader's capable hands. Darth Sidious' time was mainly taken up in over-seeing the military and defence forces for his Empire. It was work that took the Sith Lord all over the Galaxy. He kept in regular contact with his apprentice via hologram messages, as many as one every hour. Then for weeks, Darth Vader would not hear from him at all.

During the long evenings when Anakin could not sleep, he had plenty of time to contemplate the last days, weeks and months that he had spent with Padme. If someone had warned him on the day that Padme had told him she was pregnant that he would turn Sith and lose his wife, his limbs, his friends and his baby, he would not have believed them. It had all happened so quickly. His old life, the life he had wanted, had disappeared in a flash.

If he had his time over, would he have done things differently? He didn't know. He still didn't know whether Padme had been doomed to die in childbirth. Perhaps he had saved her life after all even at the cost of their marriage. Who knew? He believed he could get Padme back. If turning Sith really had saved her life then the rest of it didn't matter once she was back with him.

Or so he believed.

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For Padme too, the year was a slow one. She was at peace with Yoda in the Dagobah system. The dim days filled with dark green shadows faded gently into the dark nights. She grew to love the quiet and solitude of the swamps. She could wander unmolested for miles on the trails through the murky waters. Generally speaking, Yoda preferred her to stay closer to him but she felt safe and certainly nothing happened during the entire year to alarm her.

Anakin's presence never once made itself felt. She began to relax as the months passed without incident. As Luke and Leia's first birthday grew nearer, she became more introspective and depressed. Had it already been a year since she lost so much? In some ways, it seemed like a much shorter time. In other ways, it seemed like decades. Time had lost its meaning in the swamps but the babies' birthday was re-focusing her mind on its passing.

"Luke and Leia, you would like to see?" Yoda said to her unexpectedly one evening.

Padme glanced up at Yoda sharply. How did he read her so clearly?

"Yes, Master Yoda," she said quietly.

"To see them, your heart yearns — yes?" he said wisely.

Padme nodded. “The holograms are wonderful but they are growing so fast and I never get a chance to hold them, to spend time with them,” she replied with a sigh.

“This ache, it grows stronger,” Yoda observed. “An unhealthy obsession, it must not become. To see the children again, it is time.”

Padme looked at Yoda with shining eyes. “Is it really possible?” she asked breathlessly.

“Possible, yes. Dangerous it is but a risk that take we must. Arrangements, I will make. On their birthdays, prepare to see them,” Yoda said calmly.

“Thank you, Yoda,” Padme said gratefully. ‘I’ve been lucky in my friends,’ she added, suddenly reflective. “Sometimes I think too much of the things I’ve lost that I forget to appreciate what I still have. Good friends are certainly one of those things.”

“In what you say, wisdom there is,” Yoda said approvingly, sagely nodding his graying little head.

Chapter 4

CHAPTER FOUR

"But I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no-one will take your joy away from you. On that day, you will not question me about anything."

John 16:22-23

Padme was trembling when she landed on Alderaan with Obi Wan and Yoda. Yoda had broken his exile in order to observe the children. Padme suspected that Yoda wanted to know if there were any early signs that they had inherited their father's talent for the Force.

The Organa family and Beru were present at the Palace once more. Owen had stayed on Tatooine to see to the farm but Beru had brought Luke for the celebration.

Padme examined the children's faces with intensity. She had seen them almost every day via hologram for the past year but it was not comparable to seeing them in the flesh.

Leia was a beautiful little girl with a thick crop of brown curls and lively brown eyes. She was willful but charming and very active. But it was Luke that sent a stab through Padme's heart. If she had seen Anakin at a year old, she was sure he would have looked exactly as Luke did now. Luke's large, grave, blue eyes looked up at her. Padme knew he was intelligently processing everything he saw. "Hello Luke," she said with a smile.

Recognition at her voice lit up his small face. He had heard it nearly every day when she sent him hologram messages. "Mama!" he said contentedly and waved his tiny hands at her.

Padme drew in a shaky breath and tears came to her eyes. It was the first time either child had called her that. A huge lump came to her throat as she stared into the eyes so like her husband's.

Inevitably, she felt the whisper of Anakin's presence. She held her breath and tried not to panic. Deliberately, she closed off all thoughts of the children.

On the first day (which was the day before the children's birthday) the small party went into the local markets to buy the children's birthday presents. Padme brought Leia a delicate gold filigree box for the jewelry she would one day certainly own for the Organas were obviously wealthy. For Luke, she had obtained the Skywalker crest via a little research she had done when she had time on Naboo before moving permanently to the Dagobah System. Although Anakin had been a slave and had no records of his genealogy, the Skywalker name was an old one in the Galaxy and easy to trace information on. She did not want him to lose contact with his family roots wherever he was in the Galaxy. She wanted him to know who he was. Padme also bought a great many practical things for Beru to take back home for Luke. She knew Beru and Owen were not wealthy and Padme did not want Luke to become a financial burden for them. Already, she had set up a trust fund for Luke to defray his expenses while he was growing up. She had offered to do the same for Leia but Bail Organa had

laughed and told her it wasn't necessary — money was one thing they did not need to worry about.

Although Padme had been more at peace in the Dagobah system with Yoda, she was always happy on Alderaan with her children. The day was warm and balmy, the sky was clear and Padme savoured both the large and small joys of the day. She did not know when joy would come her way again and so, she felt it more deeply.

The birthday party went well. The King and Queen of Alderaan attended and brought gifts for the babies which touched Padme. They were Leia's adoptive Grandparents, of course but Padme did not know that. The palace servants had decorated the terrace with satin ribbons and flowers, and Luke and Leia played on a large rug in the centre of the party.

Padme watched them playing. Both of them were crawling and Luke had taken a few steps only a short time ago. The sunshine glinted off Luke's fair hair and Padme thought he looked angelic. Leia was beautiful but far too vigorous and decisive to appear angelic. Both of them were obviously well-loved and well-adjusted, and Padme was both content and grateful. She tried not to think of her departure the next day.

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Obi Wan and Yoda were accompanying Beru and Luke back to Tatooine. There had been spies there not long before which Obi Wan had sensed while watching over Luke.

Yoda had given Padme very specific co-ordinates for a small, out-lying planet out of the way of the usual notice of the Empire's bounty hunters and spies. It was a small solar system with only one of its planets having any population at all. This insignificant population lived close to the coast of the only small land mass which was located near the planet's equator. The planet could sustain life easily but its inconsequential population and minor land mass meant it was of no interest to either traders or new settlers.

Padme watched as Beru, Luke, Yoda and Obi Wan set off for Tatooine with tears running down her face. She was told that Leia and the Organas were staying a bit longer with the King and Queen but it was no longer safe for Padme to stay. Three days on Alderaan so close to the twins was dangerous enough.

Padme took off for her new temporary home just before sunset on Alderaan. Leia had smiled up at her when she held her the last time and it gave comfort to Padme that her children at least recognized her voice. She was not a stranger to them.

She had asked Yoda his impression of Luke and Leia during the short three days. Yoda had nodded his ancient head. "Strong it is, the Force with these little ones. Inherited they have, their father's ability. Restore the Jedi, I have hope they will one day do. The Dark Side, understanding of the future it clouds. Hard to see, their future is. Training they must have. Impossible to know, when or how this will be."

"So it is even more important to keep them away from their father," Padme sighed.

Yoda looked keenly at Padme. "If find you Darth Vader does, purpose there may be in this. A human shield for your children, you must be. From finding out about them, you must prevent him."

Padme looked at Yoda without saying anything for a few moments and then nodded. She understood what Yoda was trying to tell her.

A couple of hours after she took off from the palace grounds, Padme put the transport on autopilot to get some sleep. Unbeknownst to her, a small planet close by had just been hit by an asteroid and the debris was coming straight towards her ship.

Padme was woken up a few hours later by the sound of something hitting the side of the ship. She was disoriented for a few seconds until the ship was hit again. It shuddered violently.

Padme threw off the blanket and went to the command panel. She switched on the exterior lights and drew in her breath sharply. It looked like an asteroid field out there except much worse. She quickly remembered the chart she had looked at before taking off. There had been no asteroid fields in her path. If there had been she would have made a detour rather than risk the ship. It was possible to fly through an asteroid field but it wasn't wise to do so unless you had to.

It occurred to her that perhaps the ship was off-course. "Some navigator I am," she muttered to herself and another jolt shook the ship. While she switched the transport over to manual flight, she checked her travel path. It showed she was exactly on course.

"At least I'm not a total idiot," she said wryly. "But where the hell did all these rocks come from?"

She turned on her space traffic report for the relevant quadrant of the Galaxy. She had to grab the controls to narrowly dodge another rock approximately the size of a house. A disembodied voice came from the speakers updating pilots on various hazards in the Galaxy. It took all of Padme's concentration to dodge the boulders coming her way. She still caught the odd small rock on the side of the ship but it couldn't be avoided.

Within ten minutes, Padme had the answer to her question:

"The small planet of Wordell has been struck by a meteorite and a third of the planet has disintegrated into a dangerous asteroid belt near the Zargon system. We advise pilots to steer clear of this system for the present," the report said.

"Yeah, tell me that now," Padme said sarcastically but at least she now knew why she was in her current predicament. 'It would take a Jedi to steer through this mess,' she muttered, swerving yet another enormous rock. "Where is Obi Wan when you need him?"

Padme switched on the weapons. She was going to have to both blast some rocks and steer past others. The field was too thick to just dodge the asteroids. She left the space report on, hoping that they would give out more information as to the asteroid field's size. She knew she could do this for a few hours but if it took any longer than that, she would get tired and make mistakes. She had no-one to take a second shift at the controls.

Roughly an hour after waking, Padme noticed that she was nearing the centre of the asteroid field. The asteroids were actually getting larger and they were closer together. The large rocks were starting to graze the ship because the gaps were too narrow for Padme to steer the ship through. She could feel her panic rising. If she survived the next hour, she knew she would probably be okay. The problem was surviving the next hour.

Suddenly she felt the loudest bang yet and one set of instruments went berserk on the control panel. "Damn, damn, damn!" she swore. She had lost one set of engines and one side of the ship was badly damaged. The lop-sided transport would be even harder to steer.

Alarms started going off all over the control panel. Padme tried to compensate for the ship's damage with her steering but it was no good, the ship did not respond properly. Up ahead, a large boulder was approaching. Padme wrenched the wheel but she knew there was no hope of dodging it. Suddenly the ship went black, Padme was thrown against one wall and she lost consciousness.

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Darth Vader stopped mid-stride. He had been heading towards the conference room to meet with diplomats from the Lepenzo system about their non-payment of taxes to the Empire when he felt searing fear and panic hit him like a wall.

He turned on his heel and went directly to his private chambers which fortunately, were not too far away. He sat down at a table and clenched both hands. What the hell was going on with Padme? Why was she so terrified? Without thinking, his mind reached out to hers via the Force. There was no hesitation; he had grown stronger in the art of using the Force to connect with her. As always, his skills with the Force grew quickly.

She was obviously in such a stressful situation that her usual mind shields were not in place. He could feel that she was flying and that the craft was shuddering badly around her. Vader's breathing became laboured as he absorbed this information. She was in trouble, very serious trouble. She could easily die.

He gathered as much information as he could and suddenly, her mind went dark. It was not the usual slamming down of her defenses but a sudden slump into darkness. His angel was unconscious in a badly damaged ship.

He leapt to his feet and went over to his hologram message system. He instantly posted urgent messages to all his spies and contacts, as well as the space rescue services in each system. He could tell them it was an asteroid belt but one that was not usually where it was now. A response came back almost instantly.

"The only unusual asteroid belt is in the Zargon system due to the destruction of a small, local planet."

Within seconds another message went out to all Darth Vader's spies, contacts and bounty hunters in the relevant quadrant of the Galaxy to go directly to the Zargon system and rescue the ship caught in the asteroid belt. The successful person would be rewarded richly. If the passenger was brought to him alive, the reward would be trebled.

Vader knew there were powerful deep space scanning devices that could locate a ship caught in an asteroid belt almost immediately if it was used in the correct quadrant. All the bounty hunters had to do was join forces with a local system space rescue squad and they would find the ship within minutes. With the powerful rock blasting machines of the rescue squads, it would then take only an hour or two to reach the ship in an asteroid belt that size. If she was still alive, there was still time to rescue her.

'If she was alive...' Darth Vader sat down near his messaging system suddenly. He couldn't tell whether she was unconscious or dead. Right now, it was impossible to tell. He already knew that the next couple of hours would feel like years.

A message came through roughly five minutes after Vader had sent out his second communication.

"The ship has been located. We should reach it within an hour, my Lord."

— — —

Vader paced for nearly an hour and a half before he heard anything more.

"We have reached the ship, my Lord. The one female passenger is alive but unconscious. The rescue squad medical droids are treating her at present, my Lord. What are your orders?"

"Bring her back to the Command Ship at once. Do so with utmost secrecy otherwise you will forfeit your reward. She is not to be harmed in any way," Darth Vader commanded immediately. "I want regular reports as to her condition on the journey."

"Yes, my Lord."

Darth Vader sat down slowly and felt the tension slowly drain from what was left of his muscles. He literally felt light-headed. It was not a sensation he was used to, it was not a sensation he ever wished to feel again. He could literally feel his blood pressure returning to normal as a physical sensation. Gradually, his hands unclenched.

While he waited to see the wife he had not seen for over a year, he sent out a message to call off the search.

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Padme was dreaming of Anakin very vividly. They were on Naboo. It was before they were married when Anakin was her protector. The sky overhead was very blue and the grass around them was a vivid green. The familiar mountains were in the distance looked like blue glass. She felt safe because Anakin was there. She was also happy. Their relationship was still uncomplicated by politics, the Jedi Council or the crumbling of the Republic. They still thought they were on the same side. They thought they held the same ideals.

Or did they?

After all, Anakin had been talking about a wise leader who could 'make' people be decisive and agree so time wasn't wasted in 'sitting around talking'. She had thought he was teasing her. Who could really think that, anyway? It was so obviously a dictatorship he was describing and he knew she was a fierce democrat. He must have been teasing her.

Or was he?

Suddenly Anakin's young boyish face morphed into the face of the young man on Mustafar. His handsome features were twisted and darkened with anger, and something deeper and more awful that Padme could not name.

"There is no need to run away anymore. I have brought peace to the Republic. I am more powerful than the Chancellor. I can overthrow him, and together you and I can rule the

Galaxy. Make things the way we want them to be.”

Padme stared at this strange, almost mad young man before her. She didn’t recognize him anymore. She gazed at him like he was a stranger. Where was her Anakin? Suddenly she felt like she was choking. She couldn’t get her breath. Something was tightening around her throat like a vice.

“No Anakin!” she tried to call but she couldn’t get her breath.

“No!” she said and suddenly sat up, wide awake. Pain flashed through her temple immediately and she put one hand to her head. She realized it was bandaged. Looking around her, she suddenly understood that she wasn’t alone.

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Darth Vader was holding his breath without realizing it when the small transport arrived less than a day later. He had ordered them to use the fastest ship they could find in the system but even so, it was a vast distance. Padme had obviously been heading towards an out-lying star system — to hide from him, he realized bitterly.

The hover-stretcher moved slowly out of the transport’s doors, accompanied by medical droids. He could see Padme got excellent treatment which was just as well for her rescuers. He stepped over to the stretcher and his breath caught. There was no doubt it was Padme but she had pretty bad head injuries. Her face was superficially scratched and her temple was bandaged. They had cut away some of her hair near the wound but once the bandage was off, it would not be noticeable. Her ankle was also in lightweight cast. She would not be able to walk for a few months. He supposed he should be grateful for that; it may prevent her from trying to run away.

Other than that, she was still as beautiful as she had been since the last time he saw her. She still looked like the angel he had first encountered on Tatooine. He did not want his examination of her to be observed by those who had rescued her. He ordered one of his men to make arrangements for the payment of the reward then took Padme to his private apartments. There was enough room to set up a medical bay in one section; a section that had excellent security.

She stayed unconscious for another full day and Darth Vader did not leave his private apartments for the whole of this time. He supervised his projects via hologram messages. Fortunately, it was one of the times when Darth Sidious was also absorbed in other business in the far reaches of the Galaxy and was not in regular contact.

He was watching over her the first night when he noticed her frowning and moving her head. Her hands reached up to her throat as though to pull something away. She was struggling to say something but no words came out. Finally, she called out, “No!” and sat bolt upright wide awake.

Darth Vader had not expected this. He had assumed she would come out of her unconsciousness slowly and he would have time to get her used to his presence gradually. He stood there a few paces away from her stretcher with no idea of what to say or do now that she was fully awake. He was frozen to the spot. When she turned her large, brown eyes on him — eyes so familiar and loved — his voice seized up and he found himself holding his breath once more.

— — —

Padme stared at the strange, dark creature beside her bed. Was it a man in a mask or an android? Whatever it was, it was intensely frightening and intimidating. She frowned and looked around the room for someone else. She was so sure she had felt Anakin's presence in the room but perhaps it was just the dream? After all, how many times had she felt his presence but he hadn't really been there at all? It made her feel jumpy. In fact, everything about her situation made her feel jumpy.

She watched the strange dark figure for a few moments without saying anything. She had no idea why he was there or why he was standing so still and not saying anything. Suddenly an odd sound came through the mask, like a sinister and unnatural breath. It happened again and Padme realized that it actually was the creature breathing.

She could still feel Anakin's presence but where was he? And why didn't this frightening creature speak?

"Where am I?" she asked the dark figure. She figured she may as well be the one to initiate conversation. He obviously wasn't going to.

"On the Command Ship," the dark figure replied. Padme jumped. She had never heard such a strange, mechanical, menacing voice before in her life. It was very deep and strangely disembodied, as though it did not come from normal vocal chords.

"The Command Ship of what?" Padme asked.

"The Empire," it replied.

Padme cringed. If this was Darth Sidious' ship than her instincts had been correct. Anakin was somewhere close by — physically this time.

Padme cleared her throat. "Does, er... does Darth Sidious know I'm here?" she asked.

"No," it replied briefly.

"Does Darth Vader know I'm here?" she asked.

The pause was much longer this time. "Yes," it replied.

Padme nodded. Without her knowing, her eyes gave away her fear at the news. "Where is he now?" Padme asked.

"Not far away," the dark figure said in its unemotional tones after another pause.

"I guess I'll be seeing him sooner or later," she said with bravado but her fear was evident in her voice.

"Sooner rather than later," came the reply.

"Lucky me," Padme replied and lay down again and closed her eyes, hoping to block it all out.

Chapter 5

I just wanted to say ‘thank you’ to the reviewers who take the time to give so much encouragement. You’ve helped me keep the flame of this story idea alive. I truly appreciate it.

CHAPTER FIVE

“I still love you

I still want you

A thousand times these mysteries unfold themselves

Like galaxies in my head

On and on the mysteries unwind themselves

Eternities still unsaid

’Til you love me”

A Thousand Years, Sting

Padme felt as though she had been asleep for a long time. “I hit my head harder than I thought,” she muttered upon waking. She was in the same place and the sound of mechanical breathing told her that her sinister friend was still hanging around.

But there was something else... this time she was sure. She sat up suddenly and looked quickly around the room, in every corner. Anakin was definitely there. She could feel his presence very close. She glanced at the black figure to see if he would give her some clue as to where Anakin was hiding but glanced away again when she saw he was simply standing still watching her.

But something made her look back. The figure was standing too still — unnaturally still. She frowned. Something was out of place but she couldn’t quite figure it out. She sat motionless for a long time frowning and absorbed. He was definitely here but she couldn’t see him. Why would he hide?

Anakin watched Padme carefully. He had spent hours by her bedside watching her sleep. She had been sleeping for a long time, overcoming the head injury. For nearly two full days, she hadn’t stirred. Now she seemed to almost sense something was amiss. Did she sense he was here even though he looked nothing like his old self? The thought made him on edge. He wasn’t ready to be unmasked yet. He had not anticipated how to tell her what had happened to him. He had been so focused on finding her that he had not thought about the vast changes that had taken place since that had last seen each other and how he would bridge them.

A thought slid sideways into Padme’s consciousness. It was so implausible that she didn’t believe it at first. She glanced back at the silent figure next to the bed. Then she stared at him intently. If possible, the ominous figure became even more motionless as though waiting

uncertainly for her to say something. The tension was unbearable and suddenly Padme knew her sudden hunch was correct as certainly as she knew the sky over Naboo was blue.

"Ani?" she whispered finally, disbelievingly. Could her beloved Ani have become this dark, disturbing, silent creature before her?

Anakin's lips parted in shock behind his visor. She had recognized him behind the mask and armour after all. His body tensed. He had no idea what to say so he stayed silent.

Padme watched the strange figure carefully but he said nothing. The alteration in his breathing gave away the emotions that the camouflage hid.

Padme turned herself around so that her feet dangling over the edge of the bed facing him. She looked straight into the alien mask. "Ani, is that you?" she repeated gently but insistently, her voice still incredulous.

Anakin knew he had to answer her. He wanted to go up to her and touch her face gently but he was afraid that she would recoil under steel and leather of his new 'hands'. He wanted to talk to her softly but knew that his artificial voice would not respond to his wish. He looked, felt and sounded like a monster whether he wanted to or not. When he looked into Padme's large brown eyes, he cursed his new self. He had no option but to be blunt and harsh.

"Anakin is dead. I am Darth Vader," the disembodied voice said.

Goose bumps broke out all over Padme's skin. She had known it was him but having him state his identity so definitely broke the last tenuous hope Padme had that this unapproachable being was really someone else entirely and Anakin was still hiding somewhere close by.

Padme was silent for a few moments, absorbing the truth before her. "If you are Darth Vader then you are also Anakin whether you want to admit it or not," Padme contradicted flatly, her voice cool and gaze cool.

Anakin sensed her withdrawal from him with a stab of pain. "Do I look like Anakin?" he said bitterly, holding up his mechanical hands to display his new self.

Padme sensed the frustration under the question although the voice was emotionless. "No," she replied honestly. "Why are you hiding behind that mask?" she asked directly.

"This mask keeps me alive now," he said. "I have no choice but to wear it."

Padme frowned. "It keeps you alive?" she said incredulously. There was a long pause. "What happened to you?" she asked softly, gazing at him with a compassion that acted like a balm on Anakin's wounded mind as it always had.

"Didn't Obi Wan tell you?" Anakin asked resentfully. "Didn't my old master tell you what he did to his old Padawan?"

"No, he didn't. He wouldn't talk about it," Padme replied quietly.

Anakin was incredulous. He had not expected that. He was certain Obi Wan would have told her. After all, they had seemed to be in cohorts. "He did this to me! He turned me into this monster!" Anakin said angrily, shaking his clenched fists at Padme in frustration and beginning to pace agitatedly around the small room. His voice through the visor sounded frightening.

"On Mustafar?" Padme asked with a small frown, remembering that last encounter.

"Yes," Anakin said dully. "Now I can't live without elaborate life support. That's why I wear this mask and armour."

"I'm sorry, Anakin," Padme said with a sigh and a shake of her head, tears welling her large eyes. She couldn't believe her beautiful Anakin had become this dark thing. She was unhappy he had been so terribly hurt but in a sense, he had brought it on himself. It was no use to tell Anakin that though. He was prone to self-pity and blaming others for the misfortune he brought on himself. In that respect, he hadn't changed at all.

He looked so strange to her now, as though he really was a completely different person and yet... and yet underneath all that armour she could still feel her Ani. He was still there somewhere.

They were silent for a few moments.

"Now that you've brought me here, what are you going to do with me?" Padme asked simply.

Anakin frowned behind the mask. Do with her? What did she think he was going to do with her? She was his wife, she belonged by his side. That was all. He had no ulterior motive in finding her. He just wanted her here with him.

"What do you think I'm going to do with you?" he asked. Through his mask, the question sounded ominous.

"I don't know. Try and extract information, I suppose," she shrugged. She really didn't want to put ideas in his head.

He looked at her closely through the lenses of his mask. Did she honestly think he would subject her to torture and mind probes? Did she think he was that degenerate? That he had gone totally mad? He was silent for a long time.

The sinister breathing while she waited for his response made her shiver. He really was quite terrifying now.

"I won't use mind probes on you," was all he said eventually, a response delivered in the usual flat, unnatural tones.

Padme let her breath out slowly.

"It would be much better if you simply told me what I wanted to know," he continued.

Padme tensed again and looked at him warily. "I have no information that would help you find the Jedi remnant. They hid their location from me so that if you did capture me, mind probes would not work."

Anakin sneered behind his mask. Was that what the Jedi remnant thought of him? That he would treat his wife like that? He would certainly treat any of the Jedi remnants like that given half a chance, he thought furiously.

"I would assume a Jedi would be intelligent enough to take those precautions," he said, his sneer evident in his voice.

It was interesting, Padme thought, that negative emotions were carried on that mechanical voice but it would never be able to sound gentle or kind. It was a diabolical creation, designed to instill dread and intimidation. It worked very well.

Padme nodded but said nothing.

"Tell me about our child," he said suddenly.

Padme stiffened and glanced at him. It was hopeless trying to gauge what he was thinking or feeling from looking at him. His mask and armour gave nothing away. There were only the faintest hints from his strange new voice and body language.

"Our child is dead," Padme said flatly and without mercy.

Padme heard a strange gurgling noise and she realized he had just drawn in his breath sharply and the mask had distorted the sound.

"Dead?" he repeated and he seemed to almost stumble back against the nearest wall. He put out one hand to brace himself. "How?... How did that happen?" he asked.

It was the first sign of weakness Padme had seen Anakin display for a long, long time. It hurt her to see but she knew protecting her children with a lie was more important than sparing Anakin's feelings with the truth.

"Luke was stillborn," Padme said and then nearly bit her tongue. Why had she given Anakin the baby's name? If he ever happened across a Luke Skywalker at any time in the future, it was sure to make him realize his son was alive. She prayed he would forget. It was unlikely that Anakin would ever look for his son, believing him now to be dead but still... It had not been wise.

"A boy!" Anakin said, his breathing still uneven. "What happened? What went wrong?"

Padme knew she was going to have to tell a cruel lie. "You can't choke a pregnant woman until she's unconscious and expect the baby to live Anakin," she said, her voice hard with an old bitterness.

Padme watched in astonishment as the powerful, frightening figure before her seemed almost to crumble. "No," the mechanical voice said. "You were still alive, I felt it."

"Yes, I was still alive but the baby had been starved of oxygen for too long. Babies are more fragile than fully grown women Anakin," Padme replied, reinforcing the lie. She wondered at how easy it was to tell horrible lies when it meant protecting her children from the Dark Side.

It was painful to watch the large, commanding figure shudder as he clung to the wall for support. He would not look at her, his masked face was turned away and his powerful shoulders were bowed as though in physical pain.

"You... you must hate me," the disembodied voice finally said, the mask still turned away.

That was the final straw for Padme. It didn't matter what Anakin did, she had always hated to see him in pain. She had comforted him after he had killed an entire village once although later, it had seemed ridiculous and wrong to pity someone who could murder like that. But she had.

She slid off the bed and carefully limped over to him. Her ankle was still very sore. She was wearing a very pretty hospital gown but her bare feet were cold on the uncovered floors. He did not hear her coming so he was shocked when she put her arms around his neck. The shock made him still for an instant but then he quickly pulled Padme close, cursing the layers of metal and circuitry that made it impossible to feel the warmth of her skin.

"I never wanted to hurt you or the baby," he said, "Never. I just... hated seeing you with Obi Wan. I thought he was trying to take you from me. It seemed like he had succeeded. I couldn't bear it."

Padme knew there was more to it than that. Anakin would never admit his defection to the Dark Side had been wrong. He would never admit that killing the Younglings and other Jedi was not just 'a necessarily thing'. He would never face the fact that power had been his real ambition all along, regardless of the cost. Padme believed that power was ultimately more important to Anakin than love despite what he had said about the motives behind his treachery. Now that he had all the power he had ever wanted, he wanted his wife and family too. He saw no impediment to having it all. Padme knew Anakin did not (and did not want to) understand that she had run away from him because she was horrified by what he had done and what he had become. It was easier to believe that he old friends had 'turned her against him'. Anakin was not good at taking responsibility for his own actions or admitting when he was wrong.

"The Dark Side has brought so much destruction to our family," Padme stated uncompromisingly, looking up into the dark eyes of the mask. "There has been a heavy price we have all paid for it."

"We don't need to keep paying it, Padme. There is nothing I can do about the death of our son but we still have each other. It would not be hard to get rid of Darth Sidious and then, we can run the Galaxy however we want to. We can establish peace and make just laws, and never have to be apart again," he said, his mechanical monotone concealing his excitement and passion.

Padme shook her head. "I don't want to rule, Anakin. I never have. I still believe in democracy. I still think people should rule themselves. I don't share your dream or your lust for power," she said quietly. "I told you on Mustafar that you were going down a path where I couldn't follow you. That hasn't changed. I don't like the Dark Side. I don't like what it has done to us."

Anakin was very still and the only sound in the room was the menacing breathing. Padme tried to pull away but she found she was clamped against him by an immovable and immensely strong arm. "Anakin, let me go," she said calmly.

"No, Padme. You may not like the path that I've chosen but you're my wife and your place is here with me. I won't let you go. If you won't stay here willingly then you will stay here unwillingly," he said bluntly.

Padme stared at him sadly. "Has it come to this, Ani?" she whispered, tears coming to her eyes. She looked down. She didn't want him to see her cry again. She had cried enough on Mustafar and it had done no good. Tears would not move him from what he wanted. She had already learned that the hard way.

Anakin hardened his heart against her tears. He could not let her go and that was that. She belonged with him. He believed they could work out their differences and be happy together again. She just needed time to adjust, that was all.

"I'll make you happy, Padme," he promised.

Padme looked up at the blank eyes of the mask and wondered what Anakin was thinking. He would not accept that she would never be happy as his prisoner, no matter how pampered. He would never accept that his past choices would always separate them even when they were together.

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Anakin could not believe how frustrating it was not to be able to touch her. There was no part of him that could touch her flesh to flesh, not unless he was completely undressed in his pressurized apartments. The way he looked at the moment without his armour, there was no way in hell he would undress in front of her. He would not even take off his mask in her sight. His whole body was hideously scarred. He had no hair on his head and his scalp was marked with deep, wide scars. The skin was his body was red, blotchy and shiny with scar tissue. He had no legs below the knee, they were mechanical. His arms were both mechanical as well. Padme would not even recognize him anymore.

But that smooth skin and soft hair that he remembered so well — he couldn't touch it. He couldn't even look at her except through the lenses of his mask. He had not anticipated this at all. He had not considered this frustration at not being able to touch her or the shame at his own physical wreck.

He ordered the suite of rooms next to his own to be refurbished for Padme's personal use. He ensured they were pressurized like his own rooms (although he would never take off his visor when with her) and he also ensured they had the tightest security. Deep down, he couldn't make himself believe that she would run away from him but his practical side ensured that she would not be able to anyway. The suite would become her world as Anakin knew he would have to keep her presence a secret from Darth Sidious.

Chapter 6

CHAPTER SIX

You're the little boy made for me in the stars

That's why I can't let you go

The little boy made for me in the stars

That's why I love you more the further I go

And before this existence you were always there waiting for me

You are the realest thing I know

Childhood Dreams, Nelly Furtado

Padme slept a great deal for the first couple of weeks on the Command Ship, recovering from her head injury. When she was awake, Anakin made sure he was always there.

"When Darth Sidious told me you were dead, they had to sedate me for months," he said in his unnatural monotone early on.

Padme lifted her head and stared at him. What in hell had he done to make it necessary to sedate him? "Why?" she asked gently.

"If I wasn't sedated, I would destroy everything around me using the Force," he replied.

Padme's lips parted in shock. How was such a thing even possible?

"I couldn't bear it, Padme," he said, his teeth gritted behind the mask. "It was the one thing, the only thing, that I couldn't bear to happen and it did. Or so I thought."

Padme was silent. She couldn't say she regretted hiding from him and the Dark Side because she didn't.

"I wanted to die too," he stated bluntly. "Then I realized one day that you were still alive after all," he added.

"I remember," she whispered. She'd never forget the first time Anakin had crashed into her consciousness all that time after she had last seen him.

"I knew that no matter what our differences were, we would have to find a way to live with them. I can't live without you Padme, it's as simple as that," he said.

"It's not that simple, Anakin. It's not simple at all," she replied and then closed her eyes again. She still felt too weak to deal with Anakin at that point. He has a hovering, unfamiliar, black shadow and he seemed to watch her constantly and with great intensity. It was exhausting and unnerving. Tension emanated from him in waves whenever he was with her, as though he was always tightly suppressing something. In his stillness, he betrayed enormous agitation but Padme couldn't put her finger on why that would be so.

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As Padme got stronger, Anakin would tell her about other parts of the Galaxy that he had seen in the past year. He did not tell her about Darth Sidious' plans for the Empire in case Padme ever carried that information back to the Rebel Alliance. Regardless of how he felt about her, he held no illusions as to her loyalties.

Padme found it hard to be with Anakin. On one hand, he felt so familiar and comfortable. Her Anakin was still there. On the other hand, not only did he look and sound like another creature entirely but she could no longer find any common ground with him. Every topic of conversation was dangerous. They could not talk about their mutual friends because Anakin had killed so many of them in the Clone War and the attack on the Jedi Temple. Padme was afraid she would scream at him and cry until she was exhausted if even one of their names was mentioned, and what good would that do? They could not talk about politics because they disagreed profoundly on fundamental principles. They could not discuss their plans because both had to keep their knowledge hidden from the other — they could not trust each other. The past involved those gone and betrayed, and both had a different view of their future. Anakin saw his future in the Empire with Padme at his side. Padme saw the only future worth having as being away from the Dark Side and the Empire, and inevitably — away from Anakin too.

Anakin seemed to ask nothing more than to just be with Padme although he was always so tense. His energies were taken up with establishing his new Empire and so while she was there, he was not restless. Padme was unbearably restless. She had to watch every word she said constantly, her movements were restricted and she had little to do other than dress in the exquisite clothing that Anakin had brought to her in vast quantities. She was bored and felt useless. She was not made for a life of leisure and luxury. She had been a warrior, a Queen and a Senator. She was used to an active and constructive life. Here, she felt wasted and frustrated. She also felt like a pawn to the Dark Side which also made her angry and ashamed. She wanted nothing to do with Darth Sidious' plans even from the sidelines.

For all the strong emotions Anakin had displayed since she landed on the Command Ship, he was oddly distant physically. She knew he could not breathe without a pressurized suit or room but even in their apartments, he did not unmask himself. She had no idea what he looked like anymore under all that metal and circuitry. He seemed hesitant to touch her which Padme found strange. He had always been very tactile. She became very curious as to what was under that dark suit but her wildest imagination could not have prepared her for the truth. In a way, she was almost relieved. She had missed touching Anakin for the past year but doing so now could only complicate the simple fact that she had to get away if she was ever to be able to lead her own life again. She did not want to be her husband's prisoner.

Approximately a month after Padme had been brought to the Command Ship, an odd event occurred. Padme was in her rooms when the power for the entire Ship seemed to go out. This was an event that was supposed to be impossible. On these ships, there were so many back up generators that power should never go out for more than a second or two. 'Only a Jedi...' Padme began to think and then immediately knew she had to act. All the security would be down. If she was to ever get out of her suite, now was the time.

She ran in the direction of the far door. It was one that Anakin had never used because it led away from the bridge of the Ship. It was pitch dark, so she felt for the base of the door and

heaved it up. It was heavy but fortunately ran on well-oiled bearings so that it was easy to lift. Once out in the corridor, she noticed a faint green light in the distance. She could see just enough to know it was a droid carrying a battery light. She felt along the wall until she came to a doorway. Hiding just inside, she waited until the droid was level with her. She held out her foot and tripped it. It was not a very intelligent droid and Padme was able to disarm it, shoot it and take the light before it had a chance to scramble to its feet.

Padme knew she had to make her way to the flight deck. Obi Wan and Yoda would have left the ship there. She quickly assessed from her current position (in the aft of the Ship, judging by where the engines were located — she had seen them from her suite windows) that she would need to travel towards the engines. The flight deck was always located centrally and on the underbelly of ships like these.

She ran in the correct direction for a full five minutes. She did not encounter anyone. She knew they would all have been called to the power stations to restore supplies. Without power, the Ship was helpless. Restoring it would be their first priority.

Once Padme had judged (from the curvature of the corridors) that she had gone far enough, she knew she had to get lower down in the Ship. The elevators were not working. Padme bit her lip. She wasn't sure what to do next.

Suddenly she heard footsteps and she raised her weapon and fired at the figure. The blast was deflected easily by a light sabre and Padme saw with relief that it was Obi Wan.

"Padme, don't worry about getting to the flight deck. I have a transport waiting at one of the portals," he called as he ran over to her. "Are you alright?" he asked, his kind face looking worried.

"I'm fine, Obi Wan. Let's just get out of here!" she said.

They ran in the direction of one of the main portals further down the corridor. Padme could see Bail Organa in the driver's seat. His face was tense but determined as he watched them approach. Suddenly he looked with alarm just behind them but Obi Wan was faster. He turned on his heel in an instant and deflected Darth Vader's blow.

Padme screamed, "No! Stop it!"

The two men, once Master and Padawan, exchanged blows so quickly that Padme couldn't follow it. The elegant and deadly buzz of the light sabres sounded continually in the air. Suddenly from the portal, a small figure leapt with incredible agility into the corridor.

Padme would have been entranced with Yoda's incredible skill if that skill wasn't currently threatening Anakin. Somehow, he was able to hold off both Obi Wan and Yoda together but he wasn't gaining ground either. Slowly, Obi Wan and Yoda drove Darth Vader further back along the corridor giving Padme room to get through the portal. "Get in Padme!" Obi Wan called.

"No!" Darth Vader roared, doubling his blows with the light sabre.

"Go now, Padme!" Yoda commanded.

Nobody disobeyed Yoda. With tears running down her face, Padme ran to the portal and jumped through into the waiting transport. She couldn't bear the thought of anybody getting

hurt... or worse. Her heart was pounding with fear that Yoda and Obi Wan would overwhelm Anakin. They wouldn't kill him, surely? She shivered with dread.

Slowly Yoda and Obi Wan allowed Darth Vader to drive them back towards the portal. With a deft leap, Yoda jumped into the transport with Padme. Anxiously, Padme watched Obi Wan defend himself against Darth Vader's blows. Whoever this creature was, it was definitely 'Darth Vader' and not her Anakin. Darth Vader was merciless, and filled with rage and menace. She didn't recognize him. She didn't want to.

Yoda suddenly leaned out of the transport and with a deliberate flick of his wrist, sent Darth Vader flying against a wall. As Obi Wan leapt into the transport, he threw something into the corridor behind him.

Padme turned her head and saw that Obi Wan had thrown a poison bomb into the corridor. If that thing went off, it would kill Anakin immediately. There was only one way to disarm a poison bomb. Pulling out the weapon she had taken from the droid, she quickly shot the small bomb to pieces. Fire destroyed the gas and rendered it harmless.

She let out her breath slowly as the transport took off. Just before it did, she could hear Anakin screaming behind her in his deep, mechanical voice, "No! Padme!"

She turned away. She didn't want anyone to see her face. Although she had desperately wanted to get away, she was rendered breathless but how hard it had been to walk away from him at the end. It had been a terrible, awful wrench. In some ways, it had been worse than Mustafar.

"If you had left that bomb alone, it would have solved so many problems Padme," Obi Wan said in his well-bred accent. He was not pleased, Padme could tell.

"If you want to kill Anakin, you will have to do it when I'm not there," Padme said and Obi Wan knew from the tone of her voice that she meant it.

"I will be happy to oblige you," Obi Wan said.

"Thank you for rescuing me. I know what you risked to do so," Padme said quietly, looking at her friends with full eyes.

"Reluctant to leave him, you seemed," Yoda observed.

"I wanted to leave but it was still hard. I don't know why," she explained with a sigh. "I'm relieved to be gone from there but... I don't know..." She shook her head, unable to express the emotion.

"Tied to him, your heart still is. More about your heart it says than Darth Vader's worthiness of it," Yoda said wisely.

Padme smiled at him. Yoda always put things in perspective and calmed her down.

Darth Vader knew immediately the power went off in the Ship that only a Jedi could have planned the attack. He issued orders to his men to get the power working and then ran towards Padme's suite. If he knew Padme (and he did), it would have taken her two seconds to realize that with the power out, she was no longer restricted to her rooms — at least for the

time being. If she was going to run away, now was the time she would do it. With Jedi scum on the Ship, there was every chance she would succeed.

He heaved open the heavy main door and ran a battery light quickly over the rooms. Sure enough, she was not there and the end door was open. He saw the burnt out droid lying in the corridor and figured he was on the right track.

He tried to tune in to her emotions but all he felt was a sense of urgency. Her mind shields were, as usual, well in place.

He caught up with her near a main portal with Obi Wan. Red washed over his vision. Here was Obi Wan interfering in his relationship with Padme again. The anger he had felt at Mustafar came back to him ten fold. He would kill Obi Wan this time.

Obi Wan was still as skilled as he ever had been. When Yoda joined the fight, he was at a disadvantage. He could hold them off but that was all. With a sense of despair, he watched Padme run to the portal and jump through. He must not let them leave!

He fought with every ounce of strength he had with the Force but it was no good. Two Jedi Masters were still too much for a single Sith. All of them got away in the end. Obi Wan kept him distracted with the light sabre while Yoda attacked him with a blast of the Force. He didn't stand a chance against an onslaught like that.

As he recovered from the bang on his head (he was grateful for his metal helmet for once) he noticed the poison bomb but just as he saw it, it went up in flames. He looked up to see Padme holding the gun. She had saved his life and deliberately thwarted Obi Wan's plans.

But it was no good because she was taking off in the transport regardless. He bellowed after her but she did not turn around again. He radioed to the flight deck to bring a transport up to the portal so that he could follow them. If their power had been on, he could have launched a whole fleet but all they had that was working were the small transports.

The small ship appeared outside the portal in seconds and Darth Vader leapt agilely into the driver's seat. Vader circled the Command Ship hoping to sight them but he already knew he was too late. By the time the transport had arrived, they would have had time to hyperjump into a different part of the Galaxy.

And he had no idea where that might be.

Cursing, he hit the control panel and brought the transport back to the Command Ship just as the power came back on.

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Anakin lay in his suite of rooms that night, heavily sedated once more. The men had reported to Darth Sidious that he had been raging and storming again, and it was causing violent destruction to the Command Ship and its ability to function. Repair crews had to be on constant stand-by. Darth Sidious had ordered the sedatives until he could get back to the Command Ship to see to his apprentice.

"What has been happening?" Darth Sidious asked the General.

"We had a power outage for half an hour or so just before he... he started behaving like this," the General said. "Apart from that, I don't know."

Anakin had hidden Padme from everyone else on the Ship so effectively that not even his General knew she had been there or that she had escaped.

As Anakin lay in a drugged haze on his bed, he contemplated his short time with Padme. He had gotten everything all wrong. He should have known that whatever had made her hide from him after Mustafar would make her run away again. He should have at least put a tracking device on her — one she couldn't remove. He should also have made it physically impossible for her to leave the rooms even in the event of a power failure. A simple slave device would have accomplished that. He hadn't wanted to do that to her but now he had lost her again. It would have been a simple precaution that would have saved him this torment.

He also needed to do something about his appearance. He knew he looked totally foreign to her now. Perhaps if he could appear more human to her again even just in the privacy of their rooms, it would help. She may not view him as a monster if he didn't look and sound like one all the time.

He had options. There was painful surgery he could have to graft new skin and get rid of his scars. He could even grow skin over his mechanical arms and legs. It would mean having surgery whenever he needed maintenance done on his limbs but it was a small price to pay to look human again to Padme. He could have new hair implanted on his head and face, and wear contacts to cover his damaged eyes.

Well, he supposed he had time to do all of that. It had taken him a year to find her the first time. This time, the Jedi would have her even more closely protected. It may take even longer to get her back. If so, he would have enough time to work the transformation.

One thing he did know for sure, he would find her again and this time she would not get away regardless of how many Jedi came to her rescue.

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Obi Wan glanced over at Padme. "Are you alright, Padme?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, I'm fine. I got hurt in the accident in the asteroid belt, other than that I'm okay," she said with a brief, strained smile.

"He didn't use mind probes or anything like that, did he?" Obi Wan asked gently, almost wincing when he mentioned the mind probes.

"No," Padme said, her voice reflecting her own surprise. "He did nothing to hurt me, none of the things anyone expected him to do."

"Except keep you a prisoner," Obi Wan said wryly.

"Except that," Padme agreed. "I don't understand why. All he did was hang around and watch me a lot. He didn't even talk a great deal. I'm not sure what his purpose was," she admitted.

"Your husband, he is," Master Yoda said. "With him, he wanted you to be. No more, no less. Mystery there is not. That he did not hurt you to gain his own ends, grateful I am. A good sign, that is. Something of Anakin left, perhaps there is. Who knows? For sure I do know, find you again he will," Yoda concluded certainly.

"Then we will rescue Padme again," Obi Wan said with a kind smile at Padme.

"I think not. Learn from his mistakes, Darth Vader will. Make them again, he will not. An impossibility to rescue Padme again, I greatly fear," Yoda said astutely.

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Darth Vader eventually calmed down enough to not be an inadvertent destructive force wherever he went. He was able to control his emotions more quickly this time, knowing she was alive. He did not want to be forced to be under sedation too long. The longer he was sedated, the longer it would be before he could act to find Padme again.

He avoided Darth Sidious' questions about his loss of control putting it down to on-going problems with the engineers on the Death Star and his frustration over not making progress quickly enough. Darth Sidious was satisfied with the answer because it pleased him and also because his mind was still on another project in a system on the other side of the Galaxy.

Once Darth Vader seemed to be functioning fully again, Darth Sidious went back to his projects and Darth Vader began putting his plans into place.

In the first instance, he reorganized his system of contacts, bounty hunters and spies to begin the search again. After the reward given out when Padme was captured the first time, his network was eager to have a second chance.

Secondly, he sought out the most highly skilled surgeons and medical droids to begin his physical transformation. He knew he would never look the way he once did but to have smooth skin, hair and unreddened eyes was enough to begin with.

Within three months of Padme's rescue, he was ready to undertake the long and painful process. It would take many operations over a long time and patience to allow the healing of tissue each time. Skin would be grown artificially and then grafted over the burns. It would also slowly be grown over the artificial limbs, giving the blood supply a chance to develop with it. Hair would have to be implanted strand by strand, patch by patch into the new skin. For this reason, the specialists decided to do his head and face first.

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Inevitably, Yoda ordered Padme back to the Dagobah system. Nobody knew Yoda lived there and thus, nobody suspected Padme would hide there particularly in such an inhospitable environment. It also meant that Yoda was present in case anybody did happen upon Padme and try to abduct her.

Padme used the next six months to finish some more units of the Rebel Alliance training modules and also to practice the military skills she had learnt as a young girl. Her days were peaceful but she couldn't shake a feeling of waiting and of inevitability. With the threat of Anakin finding her always shadowing her thoughts, she found it difficult to invest too much into the present or make plans for the future.

Chapter 7

CHAPTER SEVEN

And I need you and I miss you and now I wonder...
If I could fall into the sky do you think time would pass me by
'Cause you know I'd walk a thousand miles if I could just see you tonight
It's always times like these when I think of you
And I wonder if you ever think of me
'Cause everything's so wrong and I don't belong
Living in your precious memories

A Thousand Miles, Vanessa Carlton

"To see Leia again, it is time," Yoda said with a nod of his small head and looked at Padme carefully to gauge her reaction.

Padme's eyes filled with tears. She had not dared ask the Jedi Master to see her children after the disaster of the last expedition. She knew that Yoda and Obi Wan blamed themselves for her capture because they let her travel unaccompanied but Padme knew it was just a freak chance that anything went wrong.

"Not Luke?" Padme asked hesitantly.

"Swarming with bounty hunters, Tatooine is now. Suspicious it would look, should Luke's family leave for a short time. Poor farmers, everyone on Tatooine assumes the family is. On trips to other planets, poor families do not go. On Tatooine, for his own safety Luke must stay," Yoda said decisively.

"You are right, Master Yoda," Padme said quietly. "Will Obi Wan stay with Luke?" she asked anxiously.

"Necessary it is," Yoda confirmed with another nod.

"Good," Padme breathed.

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So it came to be that Padme was only able to spend time with Leia for the next three years until Leia was four — old enough to only just remember her mother when she was an adult. Luke would have no memory of his mother at all. Yoda stopped even the hologram messages to Luke after Padme's rescue. There were too many spies on Tatooine who may recognize Padme's face in the hologram. Luke was never to hear his mother's voice again after his first birthday.

Alderaan was as beautiful as Padme remembered. She was to stay for three days again as a guest of the Palace. Padme went swimming in the lake on the palace grounds, something she had not been able to do since her final night on Naboo. She was a good swimmer and struck out confidently for one of the small islands in the lake. She reached it in good time and lay on

the grass staring up at the sky while the warm sun dried off her waterproof suit. She smiled. She couldn't remember the last time she had felt so relaxed. Leia was asleep and so Padme had taken this time to be by herself. Yoda had followed her to the lake but had sat himself down on a nearby rock to meditate with his back to her. Yoda has always been considerate about allowing Padme solitude and space even while protecting her.

Smiling up into the translucent blue sky, Padme could remember the summers by the lake with her school friends. It had been a special school for gifted children and because it was a selective school, it was not very large. They had all known each other well. Most of them had gone on to diplomatic careers and public life. The gifted had always been much respected on Naboo. She laughed to herself as she remembered some of the things they had gotten up to during the summer. They hadn't a care in the Galaxy back then. They all knew their futures were guaranteed to be interesting and fulfilling. They were all healthy and well-adjusted. It had been a halcyon time, a bit like when she had returned to the lake with Anakin. Padme frowned suddenly and pushed the thought away. She had been happy for the first time in nearly two years. She would not allow her thoughts to be darkened by thinking of Anakin even in their happy times.

She thought of Leia instead. Leia was a beautiful little girl and seemed born to command. Briefly, Padme wondered whether she got it from herself or from Anakin. Perhaps both, Padme thought with a smile. Bail was already talking about Leia beginning some of the junior training modules that Padme had developed within the next two to three years. She seemed too little to Padme but then again, Padme had begun her serious training at five years of age. Leia had her mother's warm brown colouring and delicate features. There was surprisingly little of Anakin in her face.

Leia already had strong ideas. She was not even two years old yet and was only just beginning to talk but she expressed herself seriously and powerfully or not at all. She was rapidly heading towards her 'terrible twos' and it showed. She had a quick temper (definitely Anakin) and was impatient (also Anakin). She tended to dominate other children her age but they all liked her because she was generous and kind and fair. If she tended to be a bit tyrannical nobody minded because she was so pretty, charming and giving.

Padme predicted to herself with a smile that Leia would one day lead in the way she had herself. She hoped that Leia would one day be a leader in the Rebel Alliance and use any diplomatic ability that Padme may have passed on to her to overthrow the Empire and restore democracy. Padme suspected that Leia may be prone to rather more direct methods than diplomacy. Leia would probably end up even more skilled with a gun than Padme. Padme's lips twitched at the thought.

Suddenly she frowned. What happened if Leia's early training did indeed lead to a life in the Rebel Alliance? She may one day come face to face with her father or rather, what was left of him Padme thought with a stab of pain. It could be dangerous. Anakin may recognize Leia's resemblance to Padme and try and turn his daughter to the Dark Side. Padme felt agitated suddenly. She wanted to tell Bail not to allow his daughter to get involved in the Rebel Alliance, to help her choose another path entirely. She sat up and was about to swim back to shore to discuss it with him when she suddenly calmed down.

She knew that if Leia was destined to follow that path then no influence from her parents would change that. For one thing, Leia was far too self-willed. If her parents tried to tell her

not to go down that path, it would probably make her more likely to do so.

Padme sat hugging her knees and looking out over the vast horizon. In front of her was the palace and behind her was a vast stretch of lake but to each side, a grassy plain expanded out to the mountain banked horizon. It was easy to be still here. It was easy to be calm. It was easy not to think too much. It had been hard adjusting to a life in exile after having led such an active life. In a great many ways, she still felt robbed of her identity. She didn't exactly feel lost without her public office but she felt her skills were wasted being idle. It frustrated her. But for now, she was content let her mind be empty and to drift even just for an afternoon.

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On the other side of the Galaxy on the Command Ship, Darth Vader was waking up from another of his skin graft operations. This operation was to replace the skin on his second arm. It was his third operation in total. He bit the inside of his bottom lip to stop himself from groaning in pain. In order to get rid of the scarring, they had to lift the skin off entirely and graft new artificially grown skin over the muscles and tendons and bones. It would take six to twelve months for the skin to heal completely and become smooth. In the meantime, he looked worse than before. The new skin was extremely thin. It would thicken over time as the capillaries nourished it. Until that happened, the thin new skin exposed to view every blood vessel and muscle underneath. In order to ensure that the skin was all the same colour as it healed, the artificially grown skin was grown over a perfect replica of his body so that it could go on in a single piece each time rather than in patches.

His head and face was done first in an extremely long and delicate operation. When he woke up, he was unable to wear his mask for a full two weeks and had to stay in his pressurized apartments. He looked hideous and avoided being seen by staying in his private apartments and issuing orders by voice rather than hologram. He was given strong pain medication but it didn't prevent the pain entirely. He could not lie down for those first two weeks and had to sleep sitting upright in a special brace.

Once the skin began to really heal however, he could see what an excellent job the specialists and medical droids had done. The scars were completely gone and the one thin scar down the back of his head and neck where they joined the skin was barely visible and would be covered with hair eventually anyway. The skin was already returning to an almost normal tone after just one month.

He had known this surgery was available when he was so badly burnt but somehow, when he thought Padme was dead, it didn't matter at all. Nothing mattered. Apart from that, he had suffered enough physical pain in recent memory. He didn't want to go through a series of painful operations. To what end?

When he realized Padme was alive, all he was focused on was finding her. He didn't think about how the physical damage he had suffered would limit his ability to touch her, to feel the softness of her skin and hair. He also didn't realize that his appearance in his mask and armour would make it so difficult for her to see him as the Anakin she had always known since Tatooine. So often, she had looked at him as though he was a stranger and not just a stranger but a menacing and frightening stranger.

As he lay there recovering from the surgery, his arm felt as though it was on fire once more as it had been on Mustafar. Even though he was on powerful pain killers, he could feel a strange calm. It was beautifully relaxing and he wondered if it was the drugs. They had not had this effect on him before. Then he realized with a thrill of excitement that it was Padme. He had not been able to reach her for over six months. He forgot the pain in his arm. He was extremely careful in how he used the Force to make contact with her this time. It had been such a long time that he would be devastated if she broke their connection immediately. He was afraid that if she sensed him, she would immediately shut him out because she still resented her capture and imprisonment.

Then again, she had saved his life before escaping with Obi Wan and Yoda. That at least showed that she did not want him dead regardless of how much she seemed to hate the Empire and the choices he had made. He clenched his fists and then winced as the muscles in his upper arm moved under the new, thin skin and made his arm burn unbearably.

She did still care for him, he knew she did, he thought fiercely. Her actions with the poison bomb proved it. She may hate the Empire and the Dark Side but she still loved him whether she wanted to or not. It made him feel a bit sick that she probably did not want to still love him but if her feelings for him were dead then there was no way that she would not have allowed Obi Wan to kill him. It was in the best interests of what the Jedi remnant and Rebel Alliance wanted to achieve.

Obi Wan would have been displeased with her. Anakin smiled — a rare occurrence since he had turned Sith. He was glad Padme had thwarted Obi Wan's plans to save him. It showed her loyalty still ultimately lay where it should, with her husband. She may agree politically and philosophically with Obi Wan and she may even trust him as a friend but her heart was still with him, her husband.

That didn't mean that he did not want to kill Obi Wan at the earliest opportunity still. Obi Wan had turned Padme away from him with all his lies about how the Jedi were not really plotting against Anakin, the Chancellor and the Republic. The Jedi had been the enemies of liberty and justice, Anakin still believed that. Anakin also believed that Darth Sidious had plans to restore peace and justice to the entire Galaxy; he just used different (and more efficient) methods than either the Jedi or the old Republic. The Jedi had wanted to hold on to their power and Obi Wan had poisoned Padme's mind with lies that they really wanted to save the Republic and democracy.

He had thought that Padme had betrayed him with Obi Wan. After all, Obi Wan had been visiting Padme when Anakin wasn't there. He knew their secrets about their marriage and their child because Padme had confided in him. He also was able to get to Padme first after Anakin had turned Sith and fill her ears with lies which she had believed. Anakin had believed without doubt that Padme had known Obi Wan was on the ship and she had brought Obi Wan with her in order to kill him. Even her protests on Mustafar that it wasn't true didn't move him. She could have been afraid for Obi Wan's sake alone and that would be why she didn't want them to fight.

After seeing what she had done with the poison bomb, he realized that Padme was not and had ever been involved with Obi Wan. It was impossible. Any woman who loved a man would not thwart him if he tried to kill his own enemy, and Anakin and Obi Wan were certainly now enemies. If Padme wanted to be with Obi Wan, the poison bomb would have

been the perfect opportunity. Anakin knew Padme was practical. She would not have saved his life out of pity. Padme herself had killed before and would do so again if need be.

The thought comforted Anakin immensely when he was feeling bereft with Padme out of his reach somewhere in the Galaxy.

For now, he could bask in her wonderful calm. He used the Force to touch ever so gently on her mind. She did not respond immediately. It was like so was sunk so deeply in a happy meditation that nothing was going to move her, not even his presence.

As Anakin lay there in pain, he gratefully soaked up her tranquility. He could sense her mind shields were in place so there was no point probing for information. Her mood slowly lulled him into a healing sleep as the drugs took effect.

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Padme knew the instant that Anakin was there as she basked in the sun on the island. She didn't care. She didn't want to fight him right then. She didn't want her happiness or calm disturbed. Her mind was blissfully empty and she concentrated on the physical sensations of the sun on her skin, the grass between her toes and the sound of the water lapping at the island's edge. Padme knew happiness was fleeting. It could not be held onto. It lighted on you like a butterfly and then was off again in an instant. The only thing to do was enjoy it while it lasted. This time, Anakin was not going to steal it from her.

Padme's three days with Leia were idyllic. She brought the little girl lots of presents although it was obvious that not only did Leia not want for anything but she was also a little bit spoilt. Padme didn't mind. Let Leia enjoy her privilege. She only wished Luke could have the same.

She tried not to think too much about Luke. It hurt her not to know when she would see him again. She would miss so much, especially now that there was no hologram message contact. Yoda had forbidden even voice messages to Tatooine. Nothing must be out of place or unusual. Nothing must draw attention to Luke.

She went back to Dagobah with Yoda with reluctance. She knew it was necessary but she was tired of hiding. It had not even been two years and she was already sick of it. She felt rebellious. She was sure Yoda sensed it and she felt ungrateful for all they were doing to protect her. She was sure that Yoda would prefer not to have her under his feet all the time having the worry of protecting her. Mind you, she wasn't sure that Yoda really worried about anything. At least, he didn't seem to.

Obi Wan was unable to visit them on Dagobah now. He didn't dare leave Tatooine for a minute. Others came to visit Yoda but Padme was not allowed to see or speak to them for fear that the information may be extracted from her by force one day. Padme knew they were members of the Rebel Alliance and she desperately wanted to be included in their plans. She was used to directing armies, overseeing military strategy and planning missions. It was what she was born and trained for. It was intensely frustrating to be kept away from it now when she had so much experience to offer.

A plan began to form in the back of her mind. If she could jump to a neighbouring Galaxy, she may be able to lead a more normal life. Anakin would not expect her to run so far with such a vast number of systems to hide in within this Galaxy. In a new Galaxy, she would have

more freedom perhaps. She could belong to a community and have some kind of work. She could make new friends and perhaps even Leia and Luke could one day visit her there.

The only thing that made it difficult to decide was the question of whether the long trip would mean she couldn't see at least Leia as often. Eventually she spoke to Yoda about the idea.

"Long and difficult this trip is," Yoda said contemplatively. "Weeks it would take. Many new things to learn there would be. Understand your frustration, I do. My home this is but your home, it is not. Make a new home, is your wish."

"I know it would be more difficult to see Leia but as I'm only visiting her once every six months or so now, it would only mean more travel for me when I did go," Padme reasoned.

"To cross between galaxies, difficult it is. A vast distance to cross in deep space there is, even using hyperjumps. Accompany you, I can but more inconspicuous in a passenger ship you may be," Yoda said thoughtfully. "Safer it would be for you."

"You don't think I would be recognized?" Padme asked anxiously.

"Travel in passenger ships, bounty hunters and spies do not," Yoda said with finality.

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Slowly Padme began to pack her things while Yoda consulted with some of his Rebel Alliance contacts as to a suitable Galaxy and system.

Finally he chose the Fornax Galaxy which was a neighbouring Galaxy (for ease of travel) and the Sashwan system which was located close to the outer edges and on the same side at her home Galaxy.

"Two weeks travel, it will take," Yoda told her. "Huge is the passenger ship, easy it will be to lose yourself in the crowd. In your cabin, stay as much as possible. Stops in a nearby system, the passenger ship does. To take a small transport to Sashwan, easy it will be. A few hours between the two is all it is."

"What is the planet like, Yoda?" Padme asked curiously.

"Since Naboo and Alderaan you are happy on, this new home similar will be. Blue is sky, green is grass, lakes there are for you to settle by," he described. "Of humans, plenty there are. For you to blend in, easy it will be. A community that is small, that would be best for you for now."

"Thank you, Yoda," Padme whispered, more grateful than she could say for Yoda's thoughtfulness. Her brown eyes turned liquid. "What can I say? I will miss you terribly. You have been a great friend to me."

"Pleasure, it always is Padme. To see you safe, my heart it does good," Yoda said with a bow of his little head. "Miss you too, I will."

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The passenger ship left a week later. It traveled regularly between the Galaxies and Padme knew that she could get back to Luke or Leia within a month if she needed to. In an

emergency, she could fly herself within a week but it was a dangerous trip in a small ship flying solo, particularly with the tricky large hyperjumps.

Padme found that she enjoyed the long trip, to her surprise. Then she realized it was the first time she had both been left to herself and was allowed among strangers in a crowd for nearly two years. She felt independent again. She felt almost free.

She wore a veil over the lower part of her face similar to the one she had worn on Tatooine when she had first met Anakin. There were other women who obviously came from desert planets who were dressed in a similar fashion, so nobody paid any attention to her.

She heeded Yoda's advice and stayed in her cabin most of the time. Generally she only emerged to exchange her books at the large library on board and occasionally to buy a snack. She had her meals sent to her room and did not attempt to make any friends on board.

Within two weeks she had disembarked and taken a hired spaceship to Sashwan. Yoda had managed to get Padme a small hologram map of the planet. Together, they had chosen a small and scattered community on the edge of a large lake. It was close enough to a city for Padme to get any supplies she wanted and distant enough for spies and bounty hunters to not bother with.

A local real estate agent was able to rent her a cottage on one of the grassy hills near the lake. There was a well and a shop with local produce within walking distance. Padme would hire one of the locals to clean her cottage for her once a week and tend to the garden. It was a large cottage and Padme did not want to waste her time cleaning it when there was still more units to write for the Rebel Alliance.

It took a few weeks for Padme to feel settled in the cottage. She had regular hologram reports from Obi Wan on Luke and Bail about Leia. She saw Leia via hologram nearly every day. She was getting prettier all the time. Padme made a routine for herself of swimming in the lake, taking long walks, working on the training units, cooking for herself and making sure she was available for reports from Obi Wan and Bail.

Because the community was so scattered, Padme rarely encountered her neighbours which suited her fine. She enjoyed her independence and freedom but found her loneliness grew rather than diminished. She had been surrounded by her handmaidens for most of her public life and then she had Anakin. She was not used to being alone. Even in her exile on Naboo she would see Obi Wan fairly regularly. In the Dagobah system, she always had Yoda.

Apart from the quiet and efficient young woman who cleaned her house (and in some ways, reminded her of her handmaidens) and one of the more elderly village men who was grateful for the income to tend her garden, Padme really did not have anyone to speak to apart from her hologram contact.

From spending her life as the centre of attention and activity while in public office, she was now isolated and alone.

Chapter 8

CHAPTER EIGHT

“The only way to conquer evil is to let it be smothered within a willing, living, human being. When it is absorbed there, like blood in a sponge or a spear thrown into one’s heart, it loses its power and goes no further.”

— Gale Wells

Padme visited Leia every six months or so on Aderaan. Each time, she took the passenger transport and never encountered any problems on the journey. In same ways, she felt safer in a crowded place. She knew Anakin assumed that if she was hiding, it would be in a remote spot. He would never think to look for her in a crowded passenger transport.

She was present for Leia’s second, third and fourth birthdays. In many ways, Leia was advanced for her age. She was insatiably curious and never still. Padme watched her leap with ease over every development hurdle. She was proud of her little girl. She believed she had a future of greatness ahead of her. On each birthday, she missed Luke fiercely. She wanted to send gifts to him on Tatooine but Yoda had strictly forbidden it. Poor farm boys did not receive parcels from other planets. Padme sent extra money to Owen and Beru at these times to buy presents but even then, they had to be careful to get nothing out of place for a boy on a farm.

For her time on Sashwan, Padme continued in the routine she had set for herself early on. In her first two years, she had nearly completed the Rebel Alliance training units. She was unsure of what her next step would be but the people in the local community were already coming to her for help and advice. There was a chance she may take on a minor office locally, more to help her neighbours with their problems than to serve any greater political ambitions. Those kinds of ambitions were closed to her now. Public life was an obvious danger in any Galaxy.

She had felt Anakin’s presence many times in the past two years. He seemed to be getting better at connecting with her using the Force. Not only was his presence more subtle and more frequent but it no longer seemed to require any intense emotional state on her part. If she was merely feeling particularly happy or content, he seemed able to find that. If she was feeling lonely or slightly depressed, he could find that too.

She didn’t care as long as her mind shields were in place. He was not as intrusive or frightening as he had been. She suspected he was doing that deliberately so that she didn’t shut him out. It was obvious that although the Force could make them feel close to each other in one sense, it was no use for anything else. If he had been able to sense where she was, he would have been there a long time ago.

She got to the point where she was able to detect the subtle signs of his moods on these occasions too. Sometimes he was very tense as though he had had a bad day.

I guess it isn’t easy being a Dark Lord, she thought wryly.

Other times, she sensed he was in some kind of pain but it was an on-going pain rather than from a recent wound or injury. At these times she wondered even more what was underneath the mask and armour.

On a couple of occasions, she could sense his frustration at being able to connect with her via the Force but be limited to just that.

There were days when she wondered how long this would go on. Would Anakin's presence haunt her for the rest of her life or would his interest eventually fade away as his plans for the Empire took up more of his energy? She had no idea.

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On the Command Ship, Anakin spent the two years that Padme was hiding on Sashwan preparing for the day she was returned to his life. He had no doubt that she would. He could not tolerate the thought that she may never return, it was as simple as that. The first year was spent painfully grafting new skin where the scarred skin had been. Once this was successfully completed, the second year was spent implanting new hair on his face and head, and growing skin and capillaries over the artificial part of his limbs.

On the whole, he was pleased with progress. The new skin did not have a bad colour the way skin grafts sometimes did. The thin scars were almost unnoticeable. The hair implants were an exact match of his old hair colour and texture, and the skin was growing well over his artificial limbs. He had found an eye specialist that had used special eye drops to reduce the redness in his singed eyes. He was able to scan the damaged iris and make a new artificial one that fitted permanently over the old as an exact replica of the healthy eye. The end result was a startling return of the sky blue eyes he remembered from nearly four years ago. The eye specialist was handsomely rewarded.

Now that his surgery was all but complete, there was even more reason to find Padme quickly. He could now face her looking like his old self in the privacy of their suites and not be ashamed.

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Padme had just finished discussing a fence dispute that one of her farming neighbours had with another when she heard the subtle beeping of her hologram message device. Making a mental note to look up the local laws with regards to the shared cost of fencing for her visitor, she went through to the room that she had set up as her private office and study.

Bail Organa was waiting patiently for her there. "Good morning, milady," he said with a smile but his face was anxious.

"Good morning, Bail. What is it?" she asked fearfully. She had never seen Bail look anything other than cheerful and self-possessed.

"I'm sorry to visit you outside of the usual time. I was hoping to catch you at home. It's Leia, she's very sick," he said gently but it was obvious that he was having a hard time even talking about it.

"Sick?" Padme repeated, turning a shade paler and sitting down suddenly.

"It's a rare disease brought over from a distant planet called Scarlett Fever. We had eradicated it on our side of the Galaxy so nobody inoculates their children here anymore. However it seems that Leia picked it up from diplomatic guests visiting from a planet called Earth. Usually is it a disease that is curable using antibiotics but Leia has a severe case, and her heart and kidneys may be affected. Because she's so young, it's quite serious. It may affect her development," Bail explained clearly, careful to give Padme all the details.

"I'll be there as soon as I can," Padme promised and got up to pack.

"Padme!" Bail Organa called after her. "Are you sure you want to risk this journey?" he asked with a note of caution.

Padme whirled around and stared at him. "Wouldn't you?" she asked forcefully.

Bail looked at her apprehensively. He knew perfectly well he would do the same thing.

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Padme had hired an intergalactic ship within a couple of hours and was on her way by early afternoon on Sashwan. She had programmed into the ship all the navigational co-ordinates and taken a droid with her to take the controls in an emergency if need be.

Padme had done difficult hyperjumps many times, particularly in her military flying training but even the most experienced pilots had difficulty with intergalactic hyperjumps. She knew it would take all her skill to pull it off but it did not make her hesitant. If the passenger ship pilots could do it regularly every two weeks, she was sure she could as well.

Padme was anxious for the entire first three days of the trip. Bail kept her up-to-date on Leia's condition. The little girl was still in the rash and fever stage. Once her skin had shed a layer, she was safe and getting well but until that happened, her condition could get worse. Behind her anxiety, she could feel the whisper of Anakin's presence. Padme was careful to keep her mind shields up but annoyed that she had to worry about it when so absorbed with anxiety for her daughter. For the first time in a long time, she resented his presence.

Padme was calm when she finally sat down at the control panel for the hyperjump stage of the journey. She carefully calibrated the controls and holding her breath, switched over to hyperdrive. With a bang, the ship shot forward into hyperspace and Padme held her breath.

The stars disappeared outside the windows of the ship and Padme was plunged into unfathomable dark. She held her breath as the seconds passed. Only a minute or so and they would be out the other side into her home Galaxy.

Suddenly the ship juddered violently. "Oh no, not again!" Padme said to herself, her heart pounding. Last time her ship did that, she had ended up with a cut head and badly sprained ankle in Anakin's suite of rooms on the Command Ship.

The ship juddered again and Padme could feel her panic rising. She bit her lip and forced herself to concentrate on the control panel before her. Carefully she made a few adjustments to the controls but just as she thought she was coming out of the rough spot, the ship began spinning uncontrollably.

Fortunately, Padme had strapped herself in before switching to hyperdrive but the spinning made it impossible to concentrate on the control panel. Padme knew that they would either

make it through the hyperjump soon or the ship would be vapourised in hyperspace. As she spun in the ship as the seconds ticked by, scenes from Padme's life came vividly to mind; her family when she was little, her old school, her time as Queen of Naboo and then as Senator of the Republic. Then her brief marriage to Anakin, Leia and Luke, and her current home on Sashwan. It was with Anakin that her thoughts lingered during her last jarring moments in hyperspace.

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Anakin was on alert immediately. Her panic had hit him like a wall once more. He was not careful or gentle in trying to connect with her this time. He knew when she felt like that it was serious trouble. Padme did not panic easily.

Fortunately, he was alone on the bridge when he felt it. He sat down at the control panel before he fell down. He had to concentrate this time. There may only be a small window of opportunity to discover information. It was desperately hard to concentrate when being battered by her fear and panic, and while coping with his own terror of the danger she was in. He gritted his teeth and focused his mind.

Images came at him from Padme's unprotected mind. He could see she was traveling again and the ship was spinning out of control. She's hyper-jumping through deep space, he realized with a start. It could only mean she was passing from one Galaxy to another. Fear gripped his heart like a vice. If she went to another Galaxy, it would be that much harder to find her. The area in their own Galaxy was impossibly vast, across two Galaxies it would be like finding a needle in a haystack. With laser-like accuracy, he probed her mind for the location deliberately ignoring everything else he may have had access to in order to grasp this one vital piece of information. He knew it would be in her recent memory.

He could see blue skies, green grass and a lake. Surely she had not been on Naboo all this time? It was impossible. The place was crawling with his spies. He searched further and saw a large cottage on a hillside. He felt intensely frustrated. He needed a name! Rapidly he scanned the relevant memories still further until he got 'Sashwan' and then suddenly, he was cut off.

To his relief, it was her mind shields going down rather than a slide into unconsciousness. She was obviously still alive and conscious. It was a good sign. His breath hissed through his mask as he relaxed slightly but he could feel her anger come through to him like an after shock. She knew he had been in her mind and she did not like it at all. She had shut him out emotionally for the first time in nearly three years.

He rose rapidly from his chair and took a reference sphere from a small navigational library in the bridge room. He placed it on the reader and said, "Sashwan" hoping it would mean something. Miniaturised pictures of Galaxies flashed by as the information was scanned by the search engine. Finally, it slowed down on a Galaxy called 'Fornax'. A hologram map of Fornax systems was suddenly projected into the room. Anakin scanned them quickly and noticed there was a system highlighted in green. He looked at the reference read out, it was a system called Sashwan. He read the other information quickly. As he had suspected, it was a neighbouring Galaxy and the system was on the border closest to their home Galaxy.

"Planets with life in Sashwan system," Anakin said. He knew that most systems, if they had any planets with life at all, usually only had one. Even the very large systems would only

have a few planets capable of supporting life.

The hologram zoomed in to the Sashwan system and the fourth planet from Sashwan's star was highlighted in green. Anakin examined the reference read out. The planet had a blue sky and the land was covered in lakes and savannah grasslands. Anakin knew he had found her. He also knew he had to be careful. Padme was no fool. She knew he had gotten behind her mind shields. What she didn't know is what he had found out. If she had any idea at all that he had discovered her location, she would not go back to it. He knew he would have to undertake this mission personally. There was no way this chance could be missed. If she was prepared to live in another Galaxy in order to hide from him, then there was little or no chance that he would ever find her if he didn't take this one opportunity that fate had handed to him. There was no room for mistakes or for failure.

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With one final shudder, the ship jerked out of hyperspace and into Padme's home Galaxy. Mercifully, the ship also stopped spinning. Padme sat back in her seat and let her breath out slowly. She was amazed they had survived.

But Anakin's presence was so strong that she had to resist the impulse to turn around to check that he wasn't standing behind her. She felt a sudden spurt of anger. Why couldn't he leave her alone, particularly when she was so stressed? She had enough to cope with just then without having to feel like she needed to look over her shoulder all the time. She was furious. Deliberately, she slammed down her defenses. She didn't feel like being indulgent of his presence right then.

Grimmly, she reset the course for Alderaan. Padme couldn't figure out why Bail wanted her to visit Alderaan when Padme knew Leia lived elsewhere. Surely it was dangerous to move the child when she was so sick? Bail had used the usual reason that it was important to protect Leia's location from Padme in case Anakin caught her again but as he hadn't used mind probes the last time, she doubted that he ever would.

Padme arrived on Alderaan in another three days feeling wiped out and exhausted. She had rested on her trip but sleep was difficult with anxiety for Leia plaguing her. As Scarlett Fever was highly contagious, Leia was kept in a closed oxygen tent. Padme and Bail's wife stayed by Leia bed around the clock, taking turns to watch over the child. In the week that Padme had been traveling, Leia had run the course of the fever and her skin was beginning to peel away. Although it looked painful, it was a good sign of recovery.

Padme questioned the medical droids about her heart and kidneys but to her relief, Leia had managed to escape these complications although her infection had been quite severe. For the first time in a week, Padme calmed down and was able to sleep properly when Bail's wife was watching Leia.

Padme stayed for two weeks at the Palace before returning to Sashwan via passenger transport. Bail had not been pleased when Padme described the hyperjump. "It sounds like the ship was not in the best condition," he said. "The ship is put under enormous stress during the jump through hyperspace so any fault will create a real danger."

"I didn't have time to examine it thoroughly," Padme admitted. "I was in a hurry to get here."

“It’s lucky you got here at all,” Bail observed dryly.

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After Padme reached Sashwan again, having been away for over three weeks, all she wanted to do was swim in the lake. She dumped her belongings in her room and quickly changed into her waterproofs. She had not been able to swim in the lake at Alderaan because she had not wanted to leave Leia’s side. She knew from hologram messages that Leia was now almost completely recovered. She still needed to convalesce and regain her strength but she was well and truly on the mend.

With a lighter heart than Padme had had in weeks, she went down to the water at twilight leaving a weather proof light on the beach to guide her back in the dark. Her favourite island was only a couple of hundred metres away from the shore. A swim there and back would be enough for the evening. She would swim again tomorrow.

With strong, even strokes she headed for the island feeling relaxed. Unlike the grassy lake islands on Alderaan, the islands were made of craggy rock and sand with some lantana. The sky overhead was nearly dark by the time she reached the island. Her light on shore glowed comfortingly in the distance. She would not stay long as there was no sun to warm and dry her off, and she would get too cold sitting still. She sat down on the sand, planning to stay for a few minutes and watch the stars come out. They constellations were unfamiliar to her but she was learning to pick them out. She leaned back against the base of a tall rocky outcropping and let her mind empty.

She did not notice a dark figure creep stealthily around the outcropping she was leaning against. As silent and deadly and powerful as a panther, Darth Vader did not waste time. He swiftly took her arm while her eyes were closed and placed a tiny metal needle into the skin. She only had time to open her eyes and gasp before the strong but harmless drug took effect. She did not even see who her attacker was in the dark before she lost consciousness.

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Darth Vader had waited for two years to have the knowledge he now did in his possession so waiting another few weeks for Padme to return to Sashwan was not an issue. He had carefully searched through her cottage under cover of night and it was obvious from how many personal belongings were left there that she had every intention of returning fairly quickly. She had not planned for a long trip. It was fortunate that Padme had no pictures of either Luke or Leia (another Jedi precaution) because Darth Vader would almost certainly have found them. In fact, Darth Vader found frustratingly little. Padme had taken all her work on the training modules with her and her hologram messaging system. All that was left were personal belongings like clothes and household effects. There were no indications as to the Rebel Alliance plans or the location of the Jedi remnant. Padme’s diplomatic training had served her well in the safeguarding of her secrets, he thought bitterly.

As it was a small community that Padme now lived in and anything out of place would be noticed, Darth Vader only visited the cottage late at night to check whether or not she had returned. Most nights, he would take a small transport (with all the lights turned off) to a small island a short distance from the lake’s shore. There was a large outcropping of rock that would hide the ship and himself from the view of the cottage quite easily. Fortunately, there were no other dwellings within sight of his hiding place (which saved him having to kill

people unnecessarily) and they would be unlikely to see either his ship or himself in the blackness of night anyway.

The day Padme returned, his spies at the passenger ship's docking port had alerted him. He knew it would not take long for Padme to fly from the port to Sashwan. He decided to risk landing on the island earlier in the day before she came back to the cottage. It was the perfect spot for an ambush, as long as no-one in the village realized he was there. If he was spotted, he would simply have to kill whoever saw him. He could not afford to have this attempt to find Padme thwarted by some village yokel.

He switched his ship over to hover drive and skimmed it over the water to the island from the opposite side to Padme's cottage. Fortunately, everyone in the village was working in their fields on the other side of the hills that bounded the lake. He carefully parked the ship in the cover of a grotto of dark rock and waited for nightfall.

Vader was crouching on the sand (which he still detested) near his ship when he heard a splashing sound. He had not dared even poke his helmeted head around the rock face in case she spotted him from the cottage and made a run for it. Not that she would get far, he thought with grim determination.

Was it possible that Padme herself was swimming out to the island? Could it possibly be made that easy for him? He had planned to wait until she was asleep and quickly drug her before she awoke. Then he could get away cleanly in his ship. Tensely, he waited for the last rays of the sun to disappear before investigating.

His heart pounding painfully in his ears, he crept slowly around the rocky outcrop. Cautiously he looked around the rock face to see who was on the beach. He actually felt his heart throb oddly as it missed a beat. It was definitely Padme. The special lenses on his mask allowed him to see with perfect clarity at night.

He knew he had to act swiftly and decisively. Fortunately, that was his specialty. Her eyes were closed which made it even easier. He had slipped the tiny needle into her skin half a second later. Two seconds after that, he was carrying her limp body back to his ship. He couldn't quite believe how easy it had been. She seemed totally unsuspecting and he wondered whether she had realized he had slipped past her mind shields during her hyperjump a few weeks ago. It did not appear so. He had been positive that she would at least come back with either Obi Wan or Yoda (or both) for protection and would then be packing to go somewhere else to hide immediately. Instead of the violent light sabre fight he had anticipated or an empty cottage because she had already been moved, it had been almost ridiculously easy.

He did not relax until his transport was sealed up and he had escaped Sashwan's atmosphere.

On Dagobah, Yoda's large green ears moved like small satellites as he picked up something amiss in the Force. His small face crumpled slightly as the knowledge came to him with conviction that neither he or Obi Wan or Leia and Luke would see Padme again for a long time to come, if ever again.

Chapter 9

I must acknowledge that Padme's best speech in this chapter is taken almost word for word from the live journal of a very wise friend of mine called 'Banzai'. He managed to articulate very clearly some half-formed thoughts in the back of my head on Anakin's character. I simply couldn't think of any better way to put it than he already had. Thanks for the clarity, Banzai.

I must also acknowledge the helpful and constructive criticism that many of my lovely reviewers have offered to me. As a very new member of the Star Wars fandom and never having written in the Sci-Fi genre before, I am aware that I am likely to make canonical and other errors. I am also writing this fan fic very quickly (averaging 1 chapter per day), so mistakes are more likely to creep in. Anyone who is kind enough to take the time to point errors out is very much appreciated and I promise that these will be fixed (as is already the case).

CHAPTER NINE

"When everything is made to be broken

I just want you to know who I am"

— Iris, Goo Goo Dolls

Anakin made sure Padme was safe and comfortable in his small transport. They would be attempting hyperjump within three days and he didn't want her injured if there were problems. He knew he would have to keep her drugged for the full journey. There were precautions he had to put in place once on the Command Ship and he knew Padme would not co-operate with them. He had to ensure that she was unconscious until everything was done and she was unable to escape. He had brought along a medical droid to monitor her condition and as soon as the ship was on course, he switched it on.

He spent lengthy periods on that week long trip simply watching Padme as she slept peacefully under the care of the medical droid. He would take off one of his gloves and gently place his hand on her arm to feel her warmth. The new skin layer over his mechanical arm was an amazing piece of medical innovation. It had a blood supply, nerve endings and even fingernails. It enabled him to feel her steady, strong pulse under his fingertips as they rested on her wrist. He was very still when he sat with her like this. He did not know when he would next have the opportunity to touch her. Once she was awake on the Command Ship, there was every chance she would want nothing to do with him ever again. Particularly once she realized what his plans were and what it would mean to her freedoms.

His gaze lingered on her face and hair. She was thirty now but she still looked very much the same to him as she had when they first met on Tatooine when she was fourteen. With a shock, he realized that it was almost literally half a lifetime ago. It did not feel that long. They had had so little time together, really. Their happiness had been so brief. In his heart of hearts,

we was not sure it could ever be found again but just having her with him was better than her being another Galaxy away. Anything was better than that.

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Once back on the Command Ship, Anakin had her taken to the suite of room she had occupied previously for such a short time. Was it only two years ago, he wondered? Sometimes it felt like ten years and other times it seemed only a few days ago.

He looked at Padme lying in the medical niche he had set up for her when she had been brought in injured last time. What he was about to do would forever alter their relationship. She would have to forgive him quite a lot if they were ever to be reconciled and live in peace. Behind his mask, Anakin bit his lip. One part of him screamed not to do it — that she would never forgive him and he'd regret it forever. Another part of him was literally sweating in terror of her escaping again if he didn't. In the end (and perhaps, as always) the fear won. He nodded to the medical droid holding large hollow needle. Carefully, the droid inserted the needle into the large vein of her inner arm near the elbow. It was done in a matter of seconds.

There was one more operation that was far more ghastly. A small titanium disk was inserted near Padme's spine at the base of her neck. It was not the operation itself that bothered Anakin because it was not very intrusive. It was the idea of putting a slave device into his wife's neck that made him feel sick. Without realizing it, his hand crept to the back of his own neck. The disk that Gardulla the Hutt had inserted into his neck was still there. He remembered vividly how much he had hated it. It had been deactivated when Gardulla lost his mother and himself to Watto in a card game.

Well, it was done now, Anakin thought with a sigh. It brought some relief to his mind. With a tiny tracking device circulating endlessly in her bloodstream (almost impossible to extract) and a slave device that would paralyze her muscles if she ventured beyond either his or her suite of rooms, even if Obi Wan and Yoda tried to rescue her again it would not work. Even if they managed to deactivate the perimeter that set off her slave device, he would be able to find her wherever she went in any of the known charted Galaxies with that tracking device. It would not take long to bring her back to the Command Ship with that knowledge always to hand.

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Padme woke up within a day of being on the Command Ship. She felt a slight pain in the back of her neck, like it had an irritating scratch but other than that she was fine. She was groggy from the drugs so it took her a few minutes to realize where she was. At first, she thought she was having a bad dream. She had dreamt of the Command Ship a few times in the past couple of years but not so much recently.

When she realized it was not a dream, she caught her breath sharply and tried to sit up. The drugs she had been given were strong, however and she found it hard to lever herself upright.

"You shouldn't be doing that so soon," a hideously familiar, mechanical voice said close by.

"Anakin!" she said, a sickening feeling flooding her veins. She was a prisoner again.

She looked around the room and found he was standing unnervingly close to one side of her head. She jerked her head away and there was a small, sharp pain in the back of her neck. She reached one hand back and felt there was a very small wound there. "What happened?" she demanded, feeling confused. "I don't remember anything. The last I knew, I was at the island in the lake after a swim."

"Don't worry, the wound is not serious. I will explain everything later. For now, you need to rest some more. You're not strong enough to get up yet," said the disembodied voice.

Padme glanced at him again. She had forgotten how utterly terrifying he now looked. In person, he was far more threatening than in her memories of her last visit.

It did not deter her, however. Padme sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. "I said, I want to know what happened!" she said angrily glaring at him and slid off the bed. The minute she tried to stand, her knees buckled. Before she could hurt herself, Anakin had caught her. "How did you move so fast?" she asked querulously, allowing him to lift her back onto the bed.

"I know your stubbornness," Anakin said wryly but his mask merely made him sound flat.

Padme merely pressed her full lips together and turned her face away from him. She didn't want to talk to this stranger who was supposed to be her husband but looked and sounded like a monster. Whoever Darth Vader was, she didn't want to know him. Obstinate closing her eyes, she allowed herself to drift back into sleep.

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Padme waited until she couldn't hear that irritating breathing before opening her eyes. She knew Anakin was close because she could feel him somewhere within their adjoined suite of rooms but she just wanted a few minutes by herself before he showed up again with his frightening, silent presence. She carefully sat up and peering around the room, she slipped off the medical bed she had been placed on. This time her legs held up easily. She had been changed out of her waterproofs into a very pretty nightgown that she vaguely remembered was provided for her during her last imprisonment.

Silently she padded over to the bathroom area of her suite (she remembered it very well) and looked in the mirror. Her hair had been taken care of and she was perfectly clean. There had been a medical droid hanging round so she supposed it had been taking care of her. The wound at the back of her neck was bothering her. She picked up a small hand mirror and turned around. Lifting her heavy curls with one hand, she examined the wound in the reflection. It was quite small but she had no idea how it had come about.

A small pinprick of pain in the inner elbow of the arm holding up her hair made her examine the skin area. There was a tiny mark as though from a thick needle. She puzzled over this and suddenly the answer was as clear as day. These were not injuries, they were deliberately inflicted. Anakin had done something to her. Something had been injected (and not just the drugs because she vaguely remembered someone grabbing her arm and pricking the skin before she fell unconscious) and someone had cut her skin dangerously near her spinal column.

Well, she would get to the bottom of this.

Stalking back into her room, she grabbed some proper clothes out of the wardrobe she had used previously and quickly got dressed in the bathroom. She pulled her hair back into a tight bun (out of pure spite, she knew Anakin preferred her long hair loose) and washed her face and brushed her teeth. Feeling more like herself, she marched back out into her suite and nearly walked smack into Darth Vader's armour.

"You're awake," he said — rather unnecessarily, Padme thought viciously.

"Yes! And now that I'm awake perhaps you would care to explain to me what you have been injecting into my arm and why I have a surgical wound in the back of my neck!" she spat.

Anakin actually took a step back. He had rarely seen Padme angry.

"Come and sit down," he invited after a pause. He could feel his blood pounding in his ears. He knew the next ten minutes was going to be very difficult.

"No! I don't want to sit down. I want an explanation!" she insisted angrily.

"Padme, I learnt from my mistakes last time," he said, his deep monotone sounding harsh to Padme's ears. "I didn't want to lose you again. I took some measures..."

"What measures?" Padme interrupted, a dangerous glint in her large brown eyes.

Anakin took a deep breath. "I put a tracking device into your bloodstream and inserted a slave device at the base of your neck," he said. The tension emanating from his dominant figure crackled across the room like electricity.

Padme sat down suddenly on the couch to one side of her. She was limp with disbelief. She thought that she would be angry and she suspected the anger would come later but for now, she was simply stunned. Padme had suspected that he would do all sorts of dreadful things to her the first time he had captured her but he had done none of those things. She had stop believing he would ever do so, even if he captured her again. Now in her mind, he was back to being the monster she had originally feared he had become. She actually felt grief and terrible disappointment. She wanted to cry, not so much for the sake of her own imprisonment but for what Anakin had really become.

She shook her head. "You really are lost to me," she murmured and stared blankly ahead of her. It was a grief too great for even tears.

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Anakin had imagined all sorts of reactions from her to the measures he had taken. He had anticipated rage, he had anticipated a refusal to speak to him or even look at him. He had never expected the blank, grief-stricken stare. He had not expected her to tell him he was lost to her when he was standing alive and well right in front of her. He had not expected her to emotionally withdraw from him so completely that he suddenly felt alone in the room even standing right next to her. He could have coped with the anger and accusations and sulks. He did not know what to do with the grief and withdrawal. He could not fight those things.

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She did not talk for days. It was as though some part of her just shut down. She wasn't eating properly and it worried him. Every attempt he had to talk to her was met with a blank

stare and then she would look away as though he wasn't there. She acted as though he had died.

At first he was bewildered, he had no idea what to do or say. After a few days, he tried pleading with her.

"Padme, please don't ignore me. We've been apart for two years and it's like we still are," he said, his distorted voice making his plea sound more like a command.

After several days, he got angry at her refusal to speak to him. "Padme! This is childish. I am still alive whether you like it or not! Stop ignoring me."

She raised her large eyes to his masked face. "My Ani is gone," she said quietly. 'He's not coming back.' She looked away from him. "My beautiful Ani," she said in such a low voice that Anakin barely heard.

Anakin wanted to yell, "I'm still here!" but something in her misery touched him.

Suddenly Padme shook her head suddenly as though coming out of a daydream and she looked at the dark figure full in the face for the first time in over a week. "If Anakin is dead and I believe he is, then I must learn to live with Darth Vader even though we are enemies," she said with so much of her old firmness and common sense that Anakin felt taken aback after her days of withdrawn depression. It was obvious she was thinking out loud but for his benefit. "So that is where we stand," she concluded, looking him in the eye.

"Anakin is not dead," he replied forcefully and with one step closed the distance between them. "I am still alive and well. I still love you," he said, taking hold of her slender arms in a gentle but firm grip.

"Anakin would never have made a slave out of me," she said, flatly contradicting him.

"You are not my slave, you are my wife. I just can't trust you not to leave me, that's all! I know the poison Obi Wan has planted in your mind about me. I don't ask anything of you except to stay with me, to be with me," he said, his impassioned speech robbed of its ardour by the mask.

"By being here with you, I'm betraying not only my old friends but everything I believe in and have worked for all my life. You are asking me to give up everything that I am for you. What have you given up for me, Anakin?" she asked bitterly.

Anakin stared at her disbelievingly. Did she still not understand after all this time? Didn't she know all he had sacrificed to try and save her life? He had given up his Jedi ties, sold his soul into the slavery of his Sith Lord and given up all of his old life.

"I gave my life, my destiny and my soul into the hands of the Sith Lord to save your life!" he hissed.

"You gave your life, your destiny and your soul into the hands of the Sith Lord to increase your own power, Anakin. You loved power more than you ever loved me," she said unequivocally.

"I can't believe you said that!" he muttered, his voice through his mask sounding like a growl. His hands tightened compulsively on her arms. "That's not true!"

"Anakin, you're hurting me!" she complained, struggling against his grip. "Let me go, now!" she ordered.

He obeyed immediately. "I can't believe you really think that!" he reiterated.

"Anakin, when I disagreed with what you had done, you turned on me and physically attacked me. You may appear to love me passionately but what you truly love is the feeling of being loved, the promise and delivery of comfort from me. It becomes easier and easier for you to deceive because the truth is less important than holding on to what you want. This is what you call 'love' but pushed to the wall it turns, just as you turned on me when I confronted you rather than comforted you for once. Anything that doesn't give you what you want is a betrayal to you," she said with icy precision.

Anakin backed away slowly from her. He could literally feel the blood draining from his face. Is that what she really thought? Is that how she really saw him, as selfish and power hungry and deceptive? She was accusing him of not really loving her but rather, only loving what she could do for him and how she used to make him feel. That's why she thought he wouldn't let her go — because he was selfish, not because he couldn't bear life without her.

He wanted to say something; to tell her she was wrong but no words would come. Instead, he turned on his heel and stalked back to his own suite with his cape flapping behind him. He sealed the door between their rooms which he had never done before. He needed some time alone to digest everything she had said. He felt like she had struck him across the face. He supposed she had felt just as shocked when he had attacked her on Mustafar in his jealous rage.

She thought he was a terrible person, he realized. It was not just their differing political affiliations or personal loyalties that had kept her away from him, he realized. It was not just that they were on different sides; she really deeply believed that he was a monstrous person who only felt passionately about her for selfish reasons — because she made him feel good.

Well, he didn't feel good right now. He felt devastated. He felt completely gutted. His hands were shaking and he felt a bit light-headed. He paced his rooms, trying to both understand why she would feel that way and also try and push it out of his mind. He went to his own medical suite and robotically removed his helmet and mask. He glanced briefly in the mirror and was relieved, as always, to see his old face looking back at him rather than the scarred fiend who had been there before.

He got up and went back to pacing. Surely he had misunderstood and she hadn't really said all that? It was lodged in his brain like a brand, however. He could not escape it. Tears began to run down the fresh, new skin of his cheeks. It seemed like the only thing Padme brought into his life these days was agony. He had spent the better part of four years tormented over their separation and now that she was back, her words pierced his emotional armour like a light sabre and rendered him helpless with confusion and pain.

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In her own rooms, Padme curled up on a couch. Her eyes were dry. She knew her words had hurt Anakin but that didn't make them any less true. It was quite awful, she thought, how often the truth was a very unpleasant thing. There would be some people who would criticize her for being unnecessarily harsh but just because somebody did not want to hear the truth did

not mean that they shouldn't. Just because the truth was harsh, didn't mean the person who delivered it wanted to be cruel or brutal. Padme didn't believe in polite lies. She had been forced to use them in diplomatic life but politics was politics and her private life was another matter entirely.

Padme felt the back of her neck again where the slave device had been implanted. It made her feel deeply humiliated, like cattle of some kind. She felt branded like a commodity. Her freedom was now completely stolen from her. It was deeply degrading to be controlled like a puppet by her husband, to have all her movements restricted. She didn't even feel like a person. She wondered if this was how Anakin had felt as a young boy when he was sold into slavery. Did he grow through his most formative years feeling like a nonperson? Vaguely she remembered her first conversation with him when he was a boy of ten. He had been angry when she had asked him if he was a slave. "I'm a person!" he had said with wounded pride. She hadn't understood. Slavery was not something she had been exposed to in her life. Looking back, it embarrassed her that she had been involved in 'winning' Anakin from Watto in a bet on the Podraces. She had seen it as giving him his freedom but she supposed that they had treated him like a commodity too and had taken him away from his one source of love — his mother.

Then he had joined the Jedi and spent ten years going, "yes Master, no Master". He probably felt it was little different from life with Watto except maybe with even less real freedom. Perhaps his break from the Jedi was actually a break for freedom except he had chosen the wrong method. Instead of being truly free, he enslaved himself to an even more demanding master — the Sith Lord. Padme suspected that Anakin had gotten 'power' and 'freedom' mixed up in his mind. He still didn't seem to understand that power hadn't brought freedom to his life. He was now imprisoned in the Dark Side. He seemed incapable of even comprehending what freedom was and so, kept running back to the known evil of having a Master.

Padme had always been free. Her family had let her choose her own path. Her education was demanding but they were given the chance to express their individuality and think for themselves. As Queen, she had responsibilities but she could have laid them down at any time if she wished. It was the same as a Senator. She had never had to say, "yes Master, no Master" to anybody. Well, she wasn't about to begin to now with her own husband, she thought grimly.

She glanced at the shut door between them. She had a feeling it would stay that way for a long time.

Chapter 10

CHAPTER TEN

Whenever I'm alone with you

You make me feel like I am free again

Whenever I'm alone with you

You make me feel like I am clean again

However far away, I will always love you

However long I stay, I will always love you

Whatever words I say, I will always love you

— The Cure, Love Song

A week passed of mind-numbing boredom for Padme. She had a parade of new clothes and luxuries brought into her rooms. A droid was assigned to her to get anything she wanted, including whatever she wanted to eat.

She spent most of her time tuned into the intergalactic news stations, listening to news from all over the Galaxy. It was heavily censored by the Empire now which was obvious from the tone of the content. If you believed the news, everything was hunky dory apart from the pesky Rebel Alliance and those systems that would not fall into line. There was no whisper on the news of the Jedi. It was as though the entire Empire believed they had all been destroyed.

The door between their suites remained shut and Padme battled between feeling relieved and annoyed with Anakin for sulking to such a degree. She remembered that he had a tendency to pout if he didn't get his own way.

In his own rooms, Anakin himself was torn between the fear that she would say something else that would leave him winded for days and the desire to see her face. They had been apart for so long that it was cruel not to be able to see her now.

After seven days of pacing in the doorway between their rooms, he finally worked up the courage to unlock the door between them. Padme was watching a hologram of the news, sitting next to the projector table and leaning over its edge, her head leaning on one hand. It was an attitude that bespoke both concentration on what was happening and an underlying boredom.

She glanced up as he strode purposefully into the room but didn't move an inch. "Hi Anakin," she said, her boredom evident in her voice. She was as relaxed and unselfconscious as she ever had been in his presence. Obviously their argument had no lingering effect on her. He felt relief. He had thought she would be angry or resentful or would ignore him.

"There is something I would like your opinion on," he said briefly.

She raised her fine eyebrows. She had not been expecting that. "Okay," she said, looking at him expectantly.

"Can you please come through to my central messaging system, it's a report from the Langsho system," he said, standing back and gesturing into the large project room in the centre of his suites.

Curiously, Padme got up and walked through to the large hologram projector.

"I have a message here from their Ambassador. He wants help negotiating a trade deal with a neighbouring system. Unfortunately, I have no experience with trade negotiations. I would appreciate the benefit of your experience," he said with a humility that reminded Padme for a brief second of the very young Anakin she had become reacquainted with on their journey to Naboo.

She looked at him oddly but nodded and said, "of course".

Anakin played the full message for her. She was silent for a few moments afterwards. "If you want my advice, you'll have to give me a couple of days to do some research on both systems. I don't know whether the deal he is proposing is in the best interests of both systems. I'd like to understand the economic, social and environmental impacts of the deal first," she said seriously.

Under his mask, Anakin smiled. It had worked perfectly. Padme was actively interested in something which would stop her from getting bored and discontented, and he knew he had the best person for the job in making the recommendations. He did not underestimate Padme's ability any more than the people of Naboo or the Senate had.

He knew as long as he could feed her tasks that did not make her compromise her political beliefs, they had a better chance of living harmoniously. He knew his Padme and she liked to be both busy and useful.

A month passed and Padme learned to adjust to her confinement. Sometimes the walls of her suite seemed to close in on her and she felt desperate just to walk down a passage. On the other hand, taking on the rather large projects that Anakin seemed only too happy to hand over to her completely gave her a far wider scope and view of the Galaxy than she had had since her time as a Senator. In some respects, she was doing more because her work wasn't just related to representing Naboo or the Opposition in the Senate — it had a broader scope.

Of course, she couldn't negotiate directly with Ambassadors and other representatives. Anakin would deliver her recommendations to them. She knew he didn't change any of them because often times counter claims were made and negotiations would go on for some time. She felt like she was doing something valuable again. It made her shattered personal life a bit easier to bear.

It did not make things easier for Anakin to bear. Working with her allowed him to spend time with her without the tense undercurrent of all that had been left unsaid about their past but the distance between them outside of work bothered him deeply. He had wanted Padme with him as his wife not as a colleague. He found it easy to work with her. He never had to explain anything because her mind was as quick as his own. It was a relief after the hard work

of making his Generals understand his plans and requirements. He felt comfortable with her. It had always been easy to be around her and he still found her presence restful.

On the other hand, he still wanted to reach out and touch her face or hair. Sometimes he had to clench his fists to stop himself from doing so. He didn't know when he would have the courage to even take off his mask in her presence. It had become a convenient way of hiding his thoughts and emotions from her. Without it, he knew he would feel hideously exposed or vulnerable. Unlike Padme herself, he had never been able to contain his emotions — particularly around her. As a young man, just the thought of seeing her had made him sweat with nervousness. Her coolness had been a counterpoint to his heat. Everything he thought and felt had been written on his face for her to see. He knew that nothing would have changed.

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Padme had discovered some disturbing new facts regarding the trade agreement that the Langsho system wished to make with its neighbour.

"Did you know that the Langsho system has a military presence throughout the Tilgalm system?" Padme asked one day, reading some diplomatic information that had just come to hand via one of the spy network.

Anakin looked at her sharply. He had not known that. Not only hadn't he known it but it was illegal for one system to occupy another with military without the Empire's express permission.

"We will put a stop to that," Anakin said. His tall dark figure radiated menace which Padme could feel almost like something physical from the other side of the room. For a flash, Anakin was lost in Darth Vader completely once more in Padme's mind.

Padme didn't ask what he meant by that because she did not want to know.

Within a couple of weeks, she found out. The spy network reported that the Empire's own forces had entered both Langsho and Tilgalm systems in order to pull Langsho's army out of Tilgalm. Many of Langsho's military died in the ruthless attack.

Not only was the Langsho military attacked and swiftly defeated but heavy fines had been imposed in order to discourage any other potential law breakers in the Empire. The government of Langsho was very, very unhappy.

Padme's face was very grim when she received the reports on the Death Toll. Anakin was away overseeing the operation between the two systems. According to the reports, not just thousands of military had died in the attacks but millions. Civilians inevitably caught in the battle sites died in the hundreds of thousands.

"Is it worth it, Anakin?" Padme said to herself, shaking her head. She felt light-headed at the carnage.

She confronted him when he returned a few days later.

"Why didn't you use more guerilla tactics and infiltrate the systems more slowly?" Padme asked, her fine brows drawn together. "It still would have succeeded but you could have saved so many lives. What is the point of such an aggressive campaign?" she demanded.

"It was quick and it sent a strong message to the other systems who may think of crossing the Empire," Anakin said darkly. He had killed many of those soldiers himself and using the Dark Side of the Force so intensely over a long period always had an odd effect on his moods.

Padme sensed the difference and instinctively knew there was no point talking to him at that point. During times like these, Anakin was completely submerged in Darth Vader and there was no reaching him. Even the way Anakin moved at these times was different. The Dark Side seemed to make him more fluid and dominant, like a panther stalking in the jungle or a dark shadow moving along a wall. He seemed even less human, as though the mask and armour was the true outward expression of who he had become inwardly.

With a look of furious disgust, Padme turned on her heel and marched through to her own suite. She hit the lock with her fist on the other side and threw herself on the couch in disgust. She had never tried to lock Anakin out before. She knew that if he was really determined to get into her suite, he could but generally he only came in if her door was open. She doubted he would intrude now.

From the other side of the locked door, Anakin could feel her disgust hit him in waves. She was angry and underneath the anger was a kind of fear, not for herself but of what he was now capable of. Like a cloud, the influence of the Dark Side lifted slightly. He head felt a bit clearer. Tuning into her emotions meant he could not focus on the Dark Side of the Force as much. It was a startling revelation.

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She did not speak to him for three days and stayed behind her locked door. It was not like Padme to sulk so Anakin was rather alarmed. He could tune in to her emotions behind the door. Basically they stayed the same for the entire three days — disgust and fear.

Problems blew up in the Langsho system again and he knew he needed her help. He did not want to override her lock. Their trust was shaky enough without undermining what fragile trust they had established in order to live in close contact.

Finally he hit on the idea of sending her a hologram message.

"Padme, I need your help with Langsho. There is an uprising. If you want to end this thing diplomatically rather than violently, I need you help," he said.

Padme stared at the hologram miniature of her husband. She knew he was being manipulative in order to bring her out of her own volition. Then again, if there was a chance she could save lives by using diplomacy then she couldn't turn her back on that. Anakin certainly knew how to push her buttons and get under her skin.

She sent back a message to Anakin. "Don't think I don't know what you're up to," she said flatly and then walked over to the door and unlocked it.

As he watched her brief message, Anakin's lips twitched under his mask. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt amused.

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The diplomatic solution was taking a longer time than Anakin had patience for. He still had 'peace-keeping' forces in both systems but he wanted the issued settled quickly. He had

other projects that were just as important. The whole process from when Langsho had first proposed the trade deal has stretched out to three months.

"How long will this take?" Anakin asked testily one day.

"It could take years," Padme said with a shrug.

Anakin slammed his fist down on the table. "I can't afford to waste years on this!" he said angrily, his mechanical voice sounding harsh.

Padme jumped and frowned at him. "It's the only peaceful solution," Padme replied firmly. He was terrifying enough these days when he was silent. When he was angry, it was far more intimidating.

"Then the solution will not be peaceful," he said with finality and stalked out of his suite before Padme could question him.

Padme did not see Anakin for a few weeks after this. She guessed he had returned to the Langsho system to implement whatever solutions he thought would be faster. She dreaded finding out what they were. While Anakin was not there, the spy reports did not come to his suite. The news reports from the Langsho system were highly censored and thus very vague. Certainly no casualty reports were issued.

All she could do was wait.

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Finally Anakin returned. Padme felt once more that Anakin had vanished into Darth Vader's persona.

"What happened?" Padme asked, the same day he returned.

"We solved the problem," Anakin replied bluntly.

"How?" she asked.

"We put in a new government," he stated flatly.

"You put in a new government? I take it that it's a government that the people of Langsho didn't vote for," she said, pressing her lips together in disapproval.

"Obviously not, there wasn't time," he said. His body language was irritable. He new Padme was about to criticize him and he wasn't in the mood.

"Why wasn't there time?" Padme asked suspiciously.

"Because the old government was gone," Anakin replied sullenly.

"Gone?" Padme repeated questioningly.

"We assassinated them," Anakin said forcefully and got up to pace. "It was the only way to restore peace in the two systems. There is a government in place now that will obey the Empire's laws."

"A puppet government you mean, with you and Darth Sidious pulling the strings. Very convenient, wouldn't you say?" Padme said icily. "You didn't have to kill them all. We could

have sorted out the situation eventually.”

“How long would it have taken Padme? I have an Empire to run and countless other systems to take care of. I couldn’t afford to waste time on just two!” he said furiously, pounding the table with one fist again.

“Perhaps the systems in the Galaxy can take care of themselves given half a chance!” Padme yelled right back. “It’s all about your precious Empire controlling everything and everyone in the Galaxy, really. It had nothing to do with establishing peace and justice, and finding solutions that benefit everybody. A galactic government should be an arbiter, not a dictator!”

“It’s easy for you to say when you have no real responsibilities!” Anakin shouted, his mask distorting his voice.

“I had these responsibilities from the age of fourteen! There is nothing you can tell me about the responsibilities of good government. You’re an amateur and it shows!” she said with her icy brand of anger.

“How dare you! I have more power now than you ever had,” he roared.

She was deathly quiet for a moment and looked at him with hard, bright eyes. “That’s just the difference between you and me, Anakin. For you, it’s about power. For me, it was about helping people. We will never agree on this.” She turned on her heel and walked away. She wanted nothing to do with him when he was like this.

She avoided him for a couple of days. She did not like it when the Dark Side of the Force was hanging around Anakin like a bad smell. It made her feel a bit sick. She despaired for him at times like this.

Less than a week after he returned, Padme was in her suite reading from a small library output device when she heard a commotion in Anakin’s suite. There were shouts of a strange language and a scuffling noise, and then shots from a plasma gun. She heard the familiar sound of a light sabre buzzing as it swung through the air.

Getting up carefully from her couch, Padme crept towards the adjoining door and peered around the edge. There was a large group of Langshan in the room. They were an ugly race — short, squat with grayish green skin and heads made up mostly of a tubular nose cavity. Their eyes and mouth were hidden under folds of thick skin.

One of the Langshan had been thrown towards her doorway by Anakin wielding the Force with one hand. He hit his head on the doorjamb and slumped dead to the floor. Padme relieved him of his plasma gun and crept over his body into the room, keeping her head below the height of the large hologram table that dominated the room.

She could see that Anakin was holding his own against the Langshans. They were dropping like flies. However, he was outnumbered about twenty to one and there was no way he could keep his eye on every one.

He could deflect every plasma shot and manage to kill a large number but the Langshans were cunning fighters. They would attack in a pack and one would try to sneak up behind Anakin while he was busy with the others. Padme noticed this pattern quickly and calmly

picked the sneaky ones off from behind the table. Because of the amount of crossfire in the room, no-one noticed that there was another gun going off.

Just as Padme thought Anakin was safe, a particularly small Langshan attacked him from behind while he was busy finishing off the remaining five Langshans currently attacking from the front. Padme almost missed seeing him because he had been hiding for most of the battle behind a couch. Just as the small creature raised its gun to fire a direct hit, Padme shot the gun out of its hand and then finished it with a shot to its head. It had been a near thing.

The fright that last attack had given Padme had given her a bad adrenalin reaction and her hands were shaking as she crept out from behind the table.

“Alright Anakin?” she asked, as he sheathed his light sabre.

He was very still as he looked at her, almost as though his thoughts were elsewhere.

“Are you alright?” she asked again.

“Yes,” he replied but all she could hear was the odd sound of his breathing through the mask.

She turned to go. She couldn’t figure out why he was behaving so oddly.

“You saved my life,” he said suddenly, “for the second time.”

“I think you may have been alright anyway,” she said, relaxing.

“Why?” he asked, even through his mask his voice sounded different.

She looked at him strangely. “Did you think I would stand by and let you die?” she asked with a frown.

“You hate what I’ve become,” he said.

“I hate the choices you’ve made and the life you’ve chosen for yourself but I don’t hate you, Anakin. How could I? I’m angry with you often because I don’t like what you do but I don’t hate you. Do you think that if I had wanted you dead that I couldn’t have killed you already?” she asked seriously.

“Do you think you could?” he asked with a touch of arrogance.

“I think you would let me,” she said quietly.

Her answer stunned him because he knew with sudden clarity that it was true. If Padme had really wanted to kill him then he would not have stopped her because in knowing she wanted him dead, he would not have wanted to live.

Anakin continued to stare at her. It made Padme feel unnerved.

“You’re staring at me Anakin. You know I don’t like that,” she said.

“Why?” he asked.

“It makes me feel uncomfortable, you know that,” Padme said. Suddenly she felt the same way she had when she had seen Anakin for the first time after ten years apart. His stare had

unnerved her then and now he was doing it again and she couldn't even see his eyes behind those dark lenses.

"You're my wife now," he said softly, although it came through the mask like a rumble.

"Sometimes I forget," she said truthfully and turned to go back to her own apartments.

Chapter 11

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“all this time I can’t believe I couldn’t see
kept in the dark but you were there in front of me
I’ve been sleeping a thousand years it seems
got to open my eyes to everything
without a thought without a voice without a soul
don’t let me die here there must be something more
bring me to life”

— Bring Me To Life, Evanescence

Anakin made an impulsive decision and he had to do it now before he lost the courage again. He went through to his own medical room and robotically removed his helmet and mask. He glanced in the mirror at his reflection and his old sky blue eyes looked back at him. His new hair had grown back to its old length on his shoulders and curled slightly. It was the same light brown as he remembered. Even the scar that had marked his face near one eye had vanished with the skin grafts.

He clenched his teeth. Walking back down that suite of rooms was far harder than having to tell Darth Sidious that something had gone wrong with one of their projects. He had no idea how she would react to seeing his face after so long.

Feeling light-headed, the walk back to her apartments felt several miles long. She was standing near the news hologram holding a library readout device, obviously looking something up. When he walked in she glanced up and the device fell from her fingers with a loud clunk. Her face looked like she was seeing a ghost.

“Padme,” he said in his own voice for the first time in over four years, “it really is me.”

The room seemed to swim in front of Padme’s eyes and she sat down on the nearby couch. She simply stared for a long time. “It’s like... you’ve come back from the dead,” she said, her eyes filling with tears.

It felt a bit that way to Anakin too.

“Why now, after so long?” she asked, the tears beginning to flow.

“I was afraid to before,” he admitted. “It was... safer behind the mask after all that time. I didn’t know how you would react.”

“Was it really easier for you?” she asked painfully. “Because it wasn’t for me,” she added almost angrily.

With a sob, she suddenly stood up and threw her arms around Anakin’s neck and as she held him, she cried harder than she had in a long time. Anakin stood stock still in shock for a moment but quickly put his arms around her. He could feel the soft skin of her face and

breathe in the scent of her hair at long last. It was so familiar that a rush of memories and emotions threatened to overwhelm him — all his best memories. He recalled the two years of agony to repair the damage the burns had created to his skin and hair. Right then, it was worth all of it.

After a long time, she finally let go of him and went to wash her face. He followed her to the bathroom and watched her reaction in the mirror when she thought she was unobserved. After washing her face, she leaned against the vanity and closed her eyes. Her face was happy and pained at the same time. She saw him watching her and she went over to him.

"I knew it was you under that mask," she said. "But I had thought I'd never see your face again."

He had removed one glove and he gently traced the skin over her cheekbone with one finger. "I thought I would never get the chance to do that again," he confessed.

She smiled and as he slowly bent his head, she lifted her mouth to his for his kiss.

Anakin could feel his heart pounding in his ears. It had been so long since he last kissed her but her touch was so familiar that it could have been yesterday. When he pulled her against him, she did not resist, even when he slowly began to undo the fastenings of her dress.

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"We could have more children, Padme," Anakin said animatedly as they lay in her bed later. He ran one large hand over the silken skin of her abdomen.

Padme's could feel an iciness infiltrate her veins at the thought. She may love Anakin despite his deep faults but she would never expose her children to his influence. No child of hers would end up a Sith.

She did not tell him that his desires for children with her would never come to pass anyway. Obi Wan had gently broken the news to her that she could no longer have children because of the complications with Luke and Leia's birth. With Luke and Leia alive and healthy, and Anakin dead to her for all intents and purposes, she had not really cared too much at the time. She had felt completely numb at that time in her life.

Padme didn't reply, just moved closer to Anakin's warmth. She couldn't see what terrible thing Obi Wan was supposed to have done to Anakin. He looked and felt very much the same to her as he had before the Dark Side had divided their paths. He was as captivatingly handsome as he had ever been when his charisma and passion had won her away from her more sensible impulses.

"Do you love me?" he asked as he played with a strand of her hair, his tone light and teasing.

Padme knew it was not a light-hearted question. "I will always love you Anakin even if we can't agree on a single thing and I don't like your choices," she said truthfully and without hesitation, her brown eyes gentle as they rested on his face.

"As long as you stay with me and keep loving me, we'll learn to adjust to the rest," he promised, his sky blue eyes caressing her face.

It was that unnerving look again, Padme recognized. It made her afraid of drowning in that blueness, of losing herself in it. She must be careful not to let her love for Anakin blind her to his serious shortcomings or she could lose herself completely and for good.

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Anakin spent the next few days close by Padme's side. It was like their honeymoon again in a sense except, Padme thought tiredly, she didn't know too many brides with slave devices in their neck that their husband had put there. Anakin was relaxed and looked as happy as he had at the beginning of their romance on Naboo. He laughed a great deal and seemed content to just be with her.

"When is the last time you laughed, Anakin?" she asked him gently one day when he had chuckled over her description of some of her neighbours on Sashwan.

He looked at her, introspective all of a sudden. "Not since you left me," he replied without hesitation.

It was on the tip of Padme's tongue to ask him whether perhaps the Dark Side had more to do with it than her absence but she decided not to spoil the day. She knew it would provoke an argument.

"When did you last laugh?" he asked good-humoredly, trying to lighten the mood again.

"When my housekeeper's pet ate her washing," Padme replied and laughed. He joined in and the moment passed.

During that time, Anakin turned off all hologram messaging so that no-one outside the room could see him without his mask. He monitored all activities on his various projects via voice reports only.

After a few days, Anakin became more moody and pensive.

"What is it?" she asked with concern, touching his arm where he sat on her couch.

"It's Sidious. He's on his way back to the Command Ship," Anakin said, his face shuttered.

"Are you sure?" she asked gently.

"Yes, I'm sure. There is a tie between us. We sense each other's movements. He knew when I was... in trouble on Mustafar," Anakin explained, frowning.

Padme was filled with horror. Her beautiful Anakin was tied in some profound way to that monster?

"How does that work?" she asked curiously, almost not wanting to know.

"The bond between a Sith Lord and his apprentice is well known to the Jedi, Padme. It works a little like my bond to you. I can sometimes sense what you're feeling. With Sidious, however, it's more a bonding of purpose and destiny. He is bound by the Force to teach me what he knows and protect me, and I am bound to obey and serve his interests," Anakin muttered, looking away from her.

"It sounds like a kind of slavery to me," Padme commented.

"It gives me enormous power, Padme. I can do so much more than I could as a Jedi," he replied defensively.

"Can you?" Padme asked doubtfully. "It sounds like your own plans and wishes are submerged in those of the Sith Lord."

"No, it's more like my plans and wishes naturally flow with his without effort," Anakin attempted to explain.

"Well, he's not going to wish for me to be in your life," Padme said matter-of-factly, walking a few paces away from her tense husband and standing with her back to him.

"He doesn't know about you," Anakin said, watching her.

"Oh, doesn't he?" Padme replied meaningfully, looking at him over her slender shoulder. "Do you think it's a coincidence he's coming back now?"

Anakin looked at her but could think of nothing to say. There was every chance that she was right.

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Sidious was back in the Command Ship the very next day and Darth Vader was back to greet him when he arrived. All the projects under his care were going well and Sidious would have no reason to complain but Padme's words from yesterday had stayed with him.

Sidious and Vader held a de-briefing session on the bridge. From his throne, Darth Sidious examined his apprentice from under his hood.

"All your projects are going well very, my young apprentice," Sidious said smoothly in his nasally voice.

"Yes, my master," Darth Vader replied.

"I sense a change in you," Sidious said after a long pause.

Vader tensed. "Do you, master?" he said respectfully.

"Yes," Sidious said and paused again. "I sense... another influence over you."

"You are my master and Emperor," Vader replied automatically.

"Yes and you are a good apprentice, the best I have had but I think you carry other things in your heart — other loyalties," Darth Sidious responded.

The tension in the room was thick enough to cut with a knife.

"What are you speaking of, my master?" Vader asked.

"Your wife," Sidious said deliberately. Vader visibly tensed under his armour. "She is here now, isn't she? I knew you were looking for her but until the last few days, I didn't realize you had succeeded. I felt some of your loyalty to me divide. I felt some of your focus move away from our plans," he accused.

"You told me she was dead!" Vader said with gritted teeth, anger sparking within him.

Sidious shrugged, not concerned by Vader's indictment. "I thought she was," he said. 'That was what we were all told at the time. I had no reason to doubt the reports.' Sidious suddenly leaned forward. "But you did, didn't you? You felt her presence using the Force one day and began looking for her. All the time, you were hiding your plans from me," he accused coldly.

"It did not interfere with my work on our plans, master," Vader said stiffly. "You said yourself that everything was progressing extremely well."

"I don't criticize your work, my apprentice. I criticize your divided loyalties," Sidious spat back.

"As I said master, my loyalty is to you and the Empire," Vader repeated.

"Really? And I suppose Padme now approves of the Dark Side and Sith, does she?" Sidious said sarcastically.

Vader stayed silent.

"She has too much influence over you, I don't like it!" Sidious concluded. "She is a weakness with you, a vulnerable spot that anyone could exploit. You will never be as powerful or invincible as you could be with Padme in your life."

Under his mask, Anakin clenched his jaw. He didn't like what Sidious was saying but he had not spent four years in misery trying to find her only to put her away from him again because Sidious told him to.

"I don't believe that is true, master. I know I can reach the highest pinnacle of power possible as a Sith regardless of whether or not my wife is with me," he argued.

Darth Sidious leaned back in his throne and examined his apprentice in silence from under his hood. Vader stood silently under his appraisal.

"You will have to kill her," Sidious pronounced eventually.

"Never!" Vader replied without hesitation or thought.

"If you really want to reach your full potential under the Dark Side certain... er... shall we say... sacrifices have to be made. You cannot have any form of attachment. Your Jedi training should have taught you at least that. It is even more so with the Dark Side. There can be no divided loyalties, no distractions and no attachment. Even friendship can dilute and complicate the purity of your purpose. There is no place for spouses when serving the Dark Side of the Force," Sidious said dispassionately.

"I won't kill her," Vader said through clenched teeth.

"I can't do it for you," Sidious said, taking Vader by surprise. He had been sure that Sidious would attempt exactly that sooner or later and he had been prepared to fight and kill his master if need be.

"The only way for you to reach your full potential is to sever this attachment by killing her yourself. There is great power in this act. If you don't, you are choosing to be less than you can be. The choice is yours alone," Sidious said mildly. 'I won't come between husband and wife,' he added with one of his odd smiles. "I have to tour the Death Star now," Sidious said, standing up. "I suggest you think about what I said."

Darth Vader nodded once and turned to go.

"By the way," Sidious called out after him. "I am not happy with your lack of loyalty to me in trying to hide your plans for Padme from me."

Before Vader could protest, Sidious had hit him with vicious lightening bolts as punishment. He left Vader lying on the bridge room floor with blue electrical charges running over his helmet and armour, seriously compromising his ability to breathe.

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Anakin staggered back to his rooms and removed his helmet and mask to help him breathe more easily in the pressurized room. His mask would need repairing and probably parts of his life support system too. He gave the mask to the medical droid to get started on.

He stumbled into his control room in his suite and collapsed onto one of the seats nearby.

Padme came through a short time later to use the more comprehensive research library stored in Anakin's rooms. When she saw Anakin's pale face, she gasped.

"What's wrong? Are you ill? I thought you would be with Darth Sidious at least all day," she said, frightened by how awful he looked. In truth, she had not expected to see Anakin for days or weeks now that Sidious was back. She put out her hand to touch him.

"Don't! The armour probably still has an electrical charge," he warned sharply.

"An electrical charge? What happened?" Padme demanded, pulling her hand back.

"Sidious knew about you..." He was panting slightly, still recovering. "He didn't like it. Thought it 'divided my loyalties,'" he explained.

"So he did this to you?" Padme asked angrily, her disbelief written all over her face. "How often does he do this sort of thing?"

Anakin shrugged. "It's how he punishes me," he admitted.

"Punishes you? You're not a naughty child, you're a grown man!" Padme almost yelled.

"That's the Sith way," Anakin said flatly.

"And you just accept that?" Padme asked furiously.

"I don't have much choice. I pledged my life to Sidious' teachings. It's not an oath easily broken," Anakin replied with an odd mixture of defiance and resignation.

"That is evil," Padme said unequivocally.

"It's one way to encourage someone not to make mistakes," Anakin replied wryly.

Padme shook her head and looked away. She did not know what it would take for Anakin to realize the truth about the Dark Side.

"He wanted me to kill you," Anakin said in a low voice.

"Of course he did!" Padme said immediately. "He's the Sith Lord and he wants to completely control his apprentice. I might be a distraction to you," she said sarcastically.

It was so close to the essence of what Sidious had said that he lifted his head and stared at her. "How did you know?" he asked incredulously.

"Evil is a very straightforward thing in some ways, Anakin," she retorted.

He wanted to say that Sidious wasn't evil but for the first time, he was no longer sure.

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Darth Sidious' words stayed with Anakin, however. He knew he would never kill Padme. He may do things to her that she hated like using tracking and slave devices to keep her with him but he would never murder her. But he often wondered what Sidious had meant about his 'full potential'. He had grown enormously in the Force in the past four years. If he could hold his own against Yoda and Obi Wan in a light sabre fight, then his power had increased exponentially. Besides that, he could feel it. The power of the Force flowed through him, connecting him to the untapped potential of the Universe. In a way, it was sometimes like carrying the Universe within me, he thought. He couldn't imagine how much more there was. He knew Sidious was still more powerful than himself but it would not be long before Anakin caught up. Would he really be invincible without his attachment to Padme? It seemed impossible. Even Darth Plagueis, Sidious' Sith master had not been invincible. Sidious had murdered him in his sleep in order to become the Sith Lord and Sidious admitted that Darth Plagueis had known more of the Dark Side of the Force than Sidious himself did now.

If reaching his full potential could not save him from being murdered in his sleep by an apprentice one day, why would he kill Padme for it even if could bring himself to do it? He already knew that he couldn't kill her anyway, so it was a moot point. He had a suspicion that Darth Sidious was manipulating him into killing Padme, not so much to allow his apprentice to 'reach his full potential' as to murder every last thing in Anakin that may make him away from Sidious' purposes.

Suddenly, for the first time, Anakin found himself doubting that Sidious was a completely good man as he had always thought. If he wasn't, then why was the Sith Lord putting in place all the plans to 'protect the Empire's interests'? Perhaps it wasn't the Empire that Sidious was concerned about but there was some deeper, darker plan that Anakin had not been made privy to. Sidious could be playing some hidden game.

One thing Anakin knew for sure, his deep and unshakable faith in Sidious had been badly undermined by his master's wish for him to kill Padme.

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Padme was thinking about the same thing as she sat in her suite, pretending to read the research she had done.

There was something in her both relieved and glad that Anakin had not mindlessly obeyed his Sith master and killed her. It meant that Anakin was truly alive and well under all that Darth Vader had become.

His 'punishment' both shocked and angered her. She could not understand wanting to serve a master like that. Then again, she had not understood his choices for a long time.

It surprised her that Darth Sidious should be so easy for her to predict but that Anakin was stunned by his master's actions. Didn't he know his master by now, having served him for

four long years? Surely Anakin didn't still believe that his master was a good man? She didn't understand this peculiar blindness that he had towards his Sith Lord. It was as though he wanted the power that Sidious had to offer so badly that he was prepared to contort the evidence of his own eyes and ears in order to cling to the idea that Sidious was 'good'. The thought depressed her. How could you reach someone like that? Their whole life, their entire thought processes were based around a lie that they wanted to believe.

Padme knew that the only person who could help Anakin was Anakin. She sighed and went back to her research.

Chapter 12

CHAPTER TWELVE

"I've looked at life from both sides now
From win and lose and still somehow
It's life's illusions I recall
I really don't know life at all"

— Joni Mitchell, Both Sides Now

Anakin was away with Darth Sidious for most of the next few weeks. Padme would see him on the occasional evening but generally, Sidious kept him busy. On the few occasions Padme saw him, he looked very serious and brooded a great deal which was not at all like Anakin's old nature that she had come to know on Naboo. Something was bothering him and it was more than just the usual changes she saw when Anakin had been enmeshed with the Dark Side of the Force for a period.

She asked him about it one night as they lay in her bed. "Something is bothering you. More than just Sidious' constant demands," she said quietly, looking into his frowning face. The shadows played over it, emphasizing the beauty of the planes and angles of his cheekbones and jaw.

He glanced at her and then looked away again, hiding his expression. He was obviously struggling with whether to discuss it with her or not. "It's nothing Padme," he said finally, stroking the hair off her face, "nothing that you can help me with this time."

Padme nodded and sighed. She closed her eyes to go to sleep. Once upon a time, she would have pressed him about it but there was so much more between them now that neither could bridge. It was probably true that she could not help him. Even in the days when she had been pregnant and Anakin so fearful, she had not been able to help him. She sighed again when she remembered where that had led and frowned before she slowly went to sleep.

Anakin watched her as she frowned but she did not open her eyes again. In some ways she was different then when they had first married. She seemed more resigned in her attitude to things. Her life had not worked out as she would have hoped or liked, he realized with a twist of his lips. He wanted to give her everything that she desired but unfortunately, her greatest desire was to get away from the Dark Side and he was now irretrievably linked to it.

His disillusionment with Sidious had been at the heart of his brooding and moods these past weeks. It had never entered his mind that Sidious may not have everyone else's best interests at heart, both Anakin's own and that of the Empire. If Sidious was capable of being manipulative to serve his own ends entirely, what else was he capable of? Perhaps his plans for the Empire were simply to serve his purposes rather than establish peace? After all, it had been well over four years since the Senate fell and there was still not peace in the Galaxy. If anything, there were far more wars and violence.

If all of this was the case, why had he not seen through Sidious when he had not relinquished his leadership of the Senate? Padme had seen it and so had Obi Wan and Yoda and the other Jedi. He still did not believe that the Jedi had not their own power to protect and this was the main motivation for their actions but if they had been even partly right about Sidious all along then where did that leave him now? What did that make him now? The thought made him feel sick but he suddenly couldn't escape it.

Why had he been blind to what others saw in Sidious' nature? In some ways, Sidious was subtle beyond belief. He had maintained iron control of the Senate for a long time, all the while appearing as though his only interests were democracy and the survival of the Republic. Yet, he had taken his first opportunity to overthrow it and establish an Empire. Anakin had honestly believed that he had done it because the Senate was failing in its duty to establish peace. Now, he wondered if peace had ever figured in Sidious' plans. He had certainly failed to accomplish it. More and more, Anakin could see the pattern of the Emperor's rule and it was not a peaceful one. Perhaps his actions showed more of his true intent than his words. If that were so, then Sidious could not be trusted with anything, even helping Anakin obtain the power with the Force that he still craved.

Anakin frowned. He wondered what it was about himself that had not allowed him to have healthy doubts about Sidious. Anakin pulled his wife's sleeping form closer, finding comfort and pleasure in her familiar shape and warmth. He had not seen the things that had tipped the other Jedi off about the then-Chancellor's plans. He had simply thought that if the Jedi were plotting against the Chancellor then they were plotting to overthrow the Republic to their own ends. However, the other Jedi had simply seen earlier what he was only beginning to suspect now.

Was he so hungry for power and knowledge of the Force that it blinded him to the truth? Or were there even more sinister reasons?

His past had not prepared him for wielding power in the way that Padme's upbringing and education had. He knew she came from a stable and happy family. He knew she had had the best education available on Naboo. She had been trained from a young age in democratic processes, diplomacy and politics. He had a feeling that although she was a respected, even loved leader; it still did not sit comfortably with her. He saw the talent that others saw and believed it would be a waste for it not to be used but he suspected that she was uneasy with having power over others. She did not like it.

For some reason he couldn't put his finger on, he craved power almost desperately. He knew Yoda said his desire was born of fear. Obi Wan had said it often enough. But he had not had the training that Padme did nor the education and so while his determination and talent had brought him the power he wanted up to a point, he was not sure of the best way to put it to use. Padme knew when to use power and when to pull back least it oppress others. Anakin had never learnt that fine distinction.

It had annoyed him that Yoda and Obi Wan had spoken so much of his 'fear'. It was a criticism that he didn't understand because he didn't feel afraid of getting hurt or of being in battle. He had displayed his courage time and time again as a Padawan. It made him angry again just thinking of it. After all, what did Yoda or Obi Wan know about feeling afraid? Obi Wan had been brought up in a similar way to Padme. It had been all good schools and a well bred, aristocratic family for him. Yoda had grown up in a swamp surrounded by his frog-like

siblings. What had he to fear? Neither of them had been chained like an animal in a slave market as a child nor been passed from master to master like a commodity. Neither of them had faced the constant insecurity of never having a home of their own and being dependent on the mercy and whims of their master. Neither of them had been punished for every mistake from a young age and made to feel as though their feelings and thoughts and dreams meant nothing because they really weren't even quite human.

Anakin realized he was trembling with anger over the thought of how hard the Jedi Council and Obi Wan particularly had been on him. They never over-looked a single mistake either. Every thought in his head was subject to the scrutiny and criticism of his Jedi Master. At least as a slave on Tatooine, he had owned his own thoughts even if he was not allowed to speak them.

There were so many things he had not learned as a child because of his slavery. He had not learned to feel that he was important in his own right. His worth had always been judged by what he could do for his master rather than who he was. With a sudden start, he realized he was still in exactly the same position now. Darth Sidious did not care about Anakin for his own sake; Sidious was only interested in what Anakin could do as Darth Vader, his Sith apprentice. If Anakin said that he no longer wanted to serve Sidious' purposes and did not agree with his plans, Sidious would have no further use for him. In fact, Sidious would kill him. Anakin was still spending his life trying to satisfy an insatiable master.

Why was he, as a man, still following the pattern of his childhood, he wondered? He had wanted power in order to be free and make his own choices, not to use them for the purposes of a master. Had his early years imprinted themselves on him so deeply that he could not imagine life without a master to guide him and give him purpose? Was he incapable of setting his own destiny?

He shook his head suddenly. No, that couldn't be true. He had chosen his own destiny. He had left his mother on Tatooine in order to pursue his freedom.

Instead, he had spent the next ten years saying "yes master, no master" to Obi Wan. But he had figured that if he could learn everything he could from the Jedi and become the most powerful Jedi ever then he would have his freedom. He could run the Jedi Council in much the same way that Yoda did, by sheer force of talent and wisdom. Everyone deferred to Yoda. He had wanted everyone to defer to him. In that way, he could be in control and no-one could ever...

Ever what, he puzzled? Ever tell him what to do again? Ever thwart his plans? Or maybe... ever hurt him again?

He shivered. Perhaps his desire for power was really a desire for enough control so that no-one could ever harm him again. Because he had been hurt — he had been hurt by being chained up and sold as a child. He had been hurt by never knowing his own father. He had been hurt by having to leave his mother in order to escape his life of slavery. He had been hurt by never having a real family of his own or any stability. He was ashamed of his own lack of education and sophistication. Perhaps that's why Padme mesmerized him. It wasn't just her beauty or her caring nature, perhaps she simply had had all he lacked and still craved. What was absent in himself, he had found in her.

The things that tormented him when he allowed himself to think of them (which wasn't often) had more to do with the humiliation of his situation and of having to obey others not as clever as himself, and with the fear of the arbitrary nature of his masters. He had not been treated mercifully. It was harder still to see his mother oppressed and the humiliation she endured having to clean the mess that others left behind. She showed more grace and character than her own masters ever did.

He learned to seek approval as a means of escaping punishment. In order to accomplish this, it took a great deal of hard work and discipline and cleverness. He learnt early to excel at pleasing his masters. He learnt early that it was essential to survival to impress his superiors. If he wanted to stay alive and not be treated harshly, he had to be exceptional. He developed the skill of learning quickly and working hard and outperforming those around him. He had taken that drive into the Jedi but they had not understood it. They had called it arrogance and being showy. He knew no other way to be. He couldn't resist the pull to 'be the best' and outperform everyone around him. It made him feel secure.

Padme was perhaps the only person who had played an important role in his life who had demanded very little of him. His eyes caressed the soft curves of her face in the half light. She gave more than she asked for. Even fundamentally disagreeing with his choices, she did not stop loving him. Any of his masters, Obi Wan included, would kill him for the same thing.

Of course, he was suspicious of losing anything good in his life. He supposed that explained his almost uncontrollable jealousy over Padme. Everything that was good in his life had been taken from him at some point; his liberty, his dignity, his opportunities, his parents and even his own sense of identity. He jealously guarded anything good that came into his life as a result. In fact, he believed that Padme was the only completely good thing he had ever had but he had been terrified all the time that she would change her mind or find someone else that she preferred. She really seemed too good to be true. He was not used to good fortune and he was certainly not used to being wanted without any strings attached. He could never quite believe that she really loved him. He was cautious when he felt lucky. He was not used to the feeling.

He was still struggling for a sense of identity even now in his mid-twenties. Padme had been right as per usual. His personality was in danger of being buried in Darth Sidious'. His desires may naturally mesh with his master's but was that really him making the choice or was it the influence of the Dark Side of the Force? Was he willing to give up his identity for the safety of feeling powerful and thus safe from harm? Was it inevitable that someone with his lack of individuality would have naturally been drawn to life as a Sith apprentice? Did that explain why he was drawn to the Dark Side when most Jedi resisted it?

He had never had much chance to develop his independence. He had been focused on pleasing his masters in order to survive. Their appreciation gave him his only sense of self. He was dependent on his master's approval to feel any sense of significance at all, he realized with a jolt. Perhaps that was really how Darth Sidious had recruited him. He was always telling Anakin how gifted and special he was. Anakin had deeply needed the approval. He got so little from Obi Wan that it frustrated him deeply and made him self-defensive in a way that sounded like arrogance. Obi Wan made him feel inadequate. Obi Wan made him feel like a nonperson again. He always needed to prove his worth to Obi Wan and point out his

accomplishments. He had needed Obi Wan's praise. It had never been forthcoming very often. Darth Sidious had always made him feel like a somebody.

Anakin wondered if Darth Sidious had known this all along and had played on the weaknesses left over from his past. If so, he was a master at manipulation with a subtlety that Anakin could barely comprehend. However, it also meant that Anakin was remarkably vulnerable in a sense. It made him easily led. He didn't like that thought at all. Anakin liked to think of himself as strong and invincible, as determined and decisive. He did not like to believe that he had been easily deceived and led down a certain path by someone who understood his vulnerabilities and exploited them.

At the same time that Anakin felt lost without the approval of a master and had little sense of self, he also had an enormous sense of entitlement. He had suffered as a child and he had worked harder than anybody else he knew. He was angry that he had had to go through so much — deeply angry. It burned him up and ate at him. He warranted the attention and praise of his masters. He had more than earned it. Not only did he crave the recognition but he also hungered after everything good that life had to offer him. He deserved compensation for all he had suffered, he believed that without question. He would hold onto every good thing that came his way with both hands because he knew with certainty that he was entitled to it after so much misery.

He had lost other things later — his friends among the Jedi when they decided to try and take power from the Senate, his son when he had been born dead, his limbs. All these things had been stolen from him. Now his life was tied irrevocably to his Sith master. He had not minded that so much until recently. Now, with all the suspicions and revelations of the past few days and weeks, it seemed like his freedom was truly gone again and this time, he would never get away.

He looked at his sleeping wife again. Truly, she had been and still was the only good thing in his life, and nothing and nobody was taking her from him. Not even his Sith Lord.

Anakin got up, careful not to wake Padme. He tied a dressing gown on and went over to the portal at the other end of her bedroom. With his arms wrapped around him, he paced with a bent head.

His thoughts were tormenting him. He wasn't able to escape them. Was the mere idea of being told to kill Padme by Sidious suddenly opening all these new doors in his mind like floodgates and making him reassess his entire life? He wanted these new views to go away but his mind ran on with a restlessness that frightened him.

He had not thought of being a slave boy on Tatooine since he left the place. He deliberately had not thought of it. He had pushed it way deep down inside himself, buried it under his merciless drive for power from the Force. He had believed that if he achieved more than any other Jedi ever had that somehow all the shame and humiliation he had felt as a little boy would disappear forever. He wanted that little boy on Tatooine to disappear forever even if he had had to become Darth Vader to do it.

He realized he was shivering again. He had betrayed the little boy that he had been in the same way that everyone else in his life had. He had become the worst tyrant of all the tyrants he had had to endure. When he no longer had real slave masters, his ambitions and his hunger to forget who had been had taken their place. He had driven himself far harder than any

master he had ever had. He had punished himself for mistakes with an unforgiving self-hatred. He would not tolerate failure or imperfections in himself.

Yet, for all that, the little boy he had been still looked out of his eyes at the Universe around him. He still saw things through his eyes. He still experienced life with the reactions of his child self. He saw threats to his safety and security everywhere. He constantly expected punishment and reacted self-defensively to everything. He not only expected constant criticism and impossible demands from others, he imposed these things on himself now.

He thought back to when he was very little. He remembered being overly sensitive to the feelings of others which made him hideously vulnerable. He had always been quiet and he enjoyed learning things on his own. What would his life have become if he had not been a slave boy? Would he still have been fearful all the time? Would he still be so concerned with pleasing his ‘masters’? Would he have been so driven to be the best in order to become invulnerable? If he had had the stability and education and security and love that Obi Wan, Yoda and Padme had grown up with would he have been more like them? Would he still be a Jedi with the Jedi Order intact and Darth Sidious now dead?

The most tormenting thing of all was how deeply he had absorbed the attitude of his masters, how deeply worthless he had felt as a child and subsequently all his life. Even now, having achieved all that he had, he still didn’t feel like it was enough. It still left him feeling empty and ashamed.

He had betrayed himself in this way, lining up with his old masters against himself. The realization knifed through Anakin’s brain and he drew a shaky breath. Why had he allied himself with the enemy? Did he hate himself so much? Had they succeeded so well at destroying everything he was — every last bit of identity and self-worth that he even cooperated with them? He stumbled against the wall as the horror of the revelation hit him for the first time like a body blow. He wasn’t just shivering, he was shaking. Tears ran from his eyes.

And he knew without doubt that everything he had done with his life had been an unconscious result of this dreadful truth. It was why he had not been able to suspect Sidious and why he had been so hungry for power and achievement that he would even turn to the Dark Side.

He glanced at the bed where Padme was sleeping peacefully. He knew he had desperately wanted to save Padme’s life but Sidious had known it as well. How brilliantly he had played his cards, how cleverly he had played Anakin himself. Anakin had walked right into the trap and it was a trap that he could not escape from, not without risking Padme’s life now.

Anakin sat down on the couch. He felt like he had been run over. He felt completely off-balance. His world had just crumbled around him. It would take him a long time to adjust to this new view of his own life. Someday, he would have to tell Padme too but not yet. He was still getting used to it himself. His mind was still trying to comprehend all these sudden revelations and his emotions could not keep up.

There were times in the next few days when Anakin wondered if Sidious knew the fundamental changes that had happened in his thoughts and feelings. There was a bond

between them of sorts and if Sidious had felt it when Anakin had Padme back in his life again, then how could he miss such a primary and vast shift in the deepest parts of Anakin's psyche?

If Sidious had felt anything, he gave nothing of his thoughts away to his apprentice. Anakin knew that didn't mean a thing. Sidious would bide his time and use his knowledge to his own best advantage; Anakin didn't doubt that for a moment any longer.

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Padme was restless with Anakin away from their suite so much these days. He had been careful to give her projects which were of importance to the Empire but revealed nothing of the Emperor's plans. She didn't mind. She didn't want to know any longer. Without the ability to escape and put the information to good use, it was not of any importance to her. She knew that whatever Sidious' plans were, people were going to get hurt. There was little she could do about it where she was. She even knew that the work she did on the projects Anakin gave her may turn out worthless if he decided they weren't bringing results fast enough. She had already learned that the hard way.

But the work did help while away the long days in confinement. Her world was now very small. The only glimpse she had of outside the walls of their suites was the stars outside the portals. She would often stand there for long periods, staring at the endless brilliance. She wondered if Leia and Luke were in the system of one of the stars she could see.

She still thought of them every day. If she stayed here for very much longer, she would miss so much of their development. They would both be five in a few months. It would be the first birthday of Leia's that Padme could not attend. Tears came to her eyes at the thought. Would Leia think she abandoned her? Leia knew Padme was her mother although she really had two mothers now with Bail's wife. Padme knew Bail and his wife would try to explain to the little girl but was she too young to understand? Would Padme's absence hurt her?

Perhaps she had been wrong to insist on seeing her children. Perhaps Leia and Luke would be happier if they hadn't known that their adoptive parents were not their real parents. She should have known that even her life of hiding would not last very long. She had underestimated Anakin's skill with the Force and his own determination to have her with him. Perhaps it had all been selfishness on her part all along to want to be a part of their lives. Perhaps it would have been less selfish to let them go completely.

Padme wiped away the tears that had fallen. Crying wasn't going to bring them to her or change the past. The melancholy that afflicted her would not abate however. She missed her children terribly and she could not get past that feeling.

Just then, Padme heard Anakin enter his suite. He came over to her immediately as he always did. "You're upset," through the mask, it was a statement and not a question.

"I'm alright, Anakin. It's probably just cabin fever," she said with a small smile that didn't reach her eyes. Her mind shields were tightly locked.

Anakin sighed in frustration behind his mask. He couldn't talk to her properly with the damn thing on. He strode into his medical room and quickly removed the mask and helmet, and came back to where she was standing looking up at the stars. She stood there like that often, he suddenly realized.

He put his arms around her and she leaned her head on his shoulder. “I could feel your sadness on my way back here,” he said questioningly.

“There are things I miss out there,” she said, inclining her head towards the vast web of stars outside the portal.

“I would love to take you out there, Padme but you would run away from me and I couldn’t bear it,” he said straight-forwardly.

Padme didn’t bother to deny it. She loved Anakin and she wanted to be with him but with the choices he had made, being with him was very costly to her.

“You’ve been quiet yourself,” she said gently but did not press him.

After a moment, he said, “one day I’ll tell you why Padme but for now, it’s too hard for me to explain.”

“Is Darth Sidious pleased with your work?” she asked, more anxious for his peace of mind than caring a jot for the Emperor’s plans.

“Very,” Anakin said truthfully.

“Good,” Padme said.

“Good?” Anakin repeated in surprise. He did not think Padme would approve any of Sidious’ plans.

“It’s good that he’s pleased. Perhaps he’ll go away again. At the very least, he won’t give you a hard time,” Padme explained bluntly.

He placed a kiss on her curly hair and hugged her tightly. “He’s going back to the other side of the Galaxy tomorrow.”

Padme smiled.

Chapter 13

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Feels like fire, I'm so in love with you
Dreams are like angels, they keep bad at bay
Love is the light, scaring darkness away

I'll protect you from the hooded claw
Keep the vampires from your door
When the chips are down I'll be around
With my undying, death-defying love for you"

— Frankie Goes to Hollywood, The Power of Love

It was with a lighter heart than usual that Anakin went to do his master's bidding after his normal rest period which was the only time he had been able to see Padme in the last few weeks. Because he was so exhausted from Sidious' demands, he had to sleep for most of that time and was jealous of the time lost with her. But today was Sidious' last day before heading back to the other side of the Galaxy for another stretch and he could have almost complete control of his own routine and movements once more.

Sidious had taught his apprentice a great many new ways of using the Dark Side of the Force during this visit. Anakin knew that his master was displeased with him because he had refused to murder Padme but obviously the most important thing to Sidious was ensuring that his apprentice was up to the tasks that he needed completed.

Anakin was surprised with the ease that he could still grow in the Dark Side of the Force despite his recent serious doubts about his past choices. He supposed that the cauldron of rage, hatred, fear and passion for power were things that he would always carry with him regardless of now knowing and understanding where they came from.

Throughout that last day with Sidious, he was given constant instructions on what needed to be accomplished before his master came back. It would be at least a standard Galaxy year before he was planning to return (except, of course, in the case of an emergency that he had to deal with personally) and he expected a vast amount of work to be done in that time including the design and construction of a faster, more agile fighter ship with more capabilities, the completion of a immense section of the Death Star and the blueprints of a weapon that could destroy an entire planet.

Anakin felt overwhelmed but he knew he could not fail in any of the tasks he was set any longer. In one sense, Sidious was right. Padme did now give him a very vulnerable spot in his life. Behind his mask he clenched his jaw. So be it. He would accomplish every task he was set no matter how difficult. He would not sacrifice Padme by failure.

Just before Sidious left, he held a final meeting with his apprentice on the bridge of the Command Ship.

"You have grown immensely with the Dark Side of the Force since I saw you last," Sidious said with his insinuating, nasally voice. "You show the fulfillment of the promise I saw in you."

Anakin, as always, felt pleased by the praise of his master. But even so, there was a niggling voice at the back of his mind reminding him that Sidious was being manipulative.

"Remember how I told you that Padme was your vulnerable spot?" he continued, leaning forward suddenly, his yellow eyes glowing.

"Yes master," the disembodied voice of Darth Vader said as his body tensed under the armour.

"Do you think I will not exploit that vulnerability myself to drive you to greater accomplishment?" Darth Sidious asked with one of his ghastly smiles.

Darth Vader was silent. So, his suspicions were correct. It was no coincidence that Sidious was giving him much harder tasks than he ever had before.

In the bridge room, the only sound was Darth Vader's mechanical breathing.

"You have the chance to prove yourself worthy to continue to be my apprentice despite your weakness with regard to your wife," the Emperor said, spitting out the last word with disgust. "I would take it seriously, if I were you. The only thing that has prevented me killing you both already is the lack of other Jedi from which to recruit myself a new apprentice."

Anakin could feel Darth Vader rising up inside himself at Sidious' words. Vader always rose to the surface on a tide of ferocious anger. How dare Sidious threaten him when he had accomplished so much not only as an apprentice but for the Empire too? He had not failed in any task he had been given apart from the one of killing Padme.

Vader knew that Sidious could sense his anger. Let him sense it, Vader thought viciously. He did not care. He wanted Sidious to be as angry as he was himself.

"The new crop of Younglings in the Galaxy is weak," Sidious said with a sneer. "All my scouts have not located a Youngling worthy of one day recruiting to the Sith."

Vader was momentarily distracted at the thought of new Younglings. They would be getting close to the age that Yoda would have begun training them now. Would any of these youngsters find their way into the Rebel Alliance? And if so, would Yoda or Obi Wan train them? It would be dangerous for them to do so. It would bring the focused attention of the Sith and the Empire on their activities whereas they may be able to accomplish more through guerilla type warfare and underground tactics. Besides, Vader thought, if they were not strong with the Force then it would not be worth training them. To get a child from Youngling to Padawan to Jedi took enormous resources, particularly time. It was something that the Rebel Alliance and Jedi remnant did not have.

"You are fortunate to be my apprentice at a time when there are no talented Jedi to take your place," Sidious said maliciously, leaning back in his throne once more.

Vader's anger was building and he pressed his lips together to stop himself retorting that Sidious was lucky to have found such a talented Jedi who could be manipulated into becoming his apprentice so easily. He knew he was the most talented Jedi of his generation.

He also knew that talented Jedi who would turn Sith were rare enough for their Sith Masters to invest a lot of time and energy into recruiting and training them.

"I have served you well, master," Vader said in his flat tones.

"Yes, you have," Sidious acknowledged. "However, I have sensed a change in you just lately, my young apprentice."

Vader was very still. He had been afraid of this moment and it was finally here.

"Interestingly enough, it has nothing to do with your wife," Sidious said slowly, allowing his apprentice's tension to build and enjoying his discomfort. "I think perhaps, the Force may have revealed to you some unpleasant truths about your past and how it has affected you."

Vader drew in his breath sharply. How had Sidious known what had gone on in the privacy of his own thoughts?

"You have doubts, do you not? Perhaps you doubt that your choice to join the Dark Side was the right one, in light of these revelations?" the Emperor continued and then was quiet for a few moments, watching his apprentice's reaction.

The mask did more for Vader than allow him to breathe. It also hid a great many of his emotional reactions. Unfortunately, Sidious could still sense them using the Force and the odd bond between them.

"I have taken an oath, my master," Vader replied carefully.

Sidious shrugged contemptuously. "You took an oath as a Jedi too and look where you are now," he said with a dismissive wave of one hand.

Vader was silent.

"I find that your wife has become useful to me after all. You fear for her life and your fear is wise. I have use of you regardless of your doubts. Your doubts have not prevented your continued growth in the Dark Side."

Vader started in surprise.

"Oh yes, the things I have taught you recently were tests," Sidious said with a smile, reading Vader's reaction. "I wanted to see if these doubts would prevent you from becoming as powerful as I want you to be."

Vader's eyes narrowed behind his mask. 'As powerful as I want you to be?' he repeated to himself in his thoughts. Sidious was no longer even bothering to try and pretend that he had the intention of allowing Vader to become as powerful as he could be in the Dark Side of the Force. His only interest in Vader was in developing him enough to serve his own purposes. He could now see that Sidious had never intended to teach Vader everything he knew and allow him to one day surpass him. In Sidious' mind, Vader was a useful but disposable commodity. And now, he was not even bothering to pretend that he cared about Vader's welfare or what was best for his apprentice the way he once had.

"Fortunately for you and your lovely wife, it has not," Sidious said bluntly. "Through a fortuitous set of circumstances, both you and your wife will live but on only one condition —

that you do not fail me in any task I set you. If I find cause to question your loyalties to my plans, I will kill you both without hesitation. Do I make myself clear?" he hissed.

"Perfectly," Vader replied impassively but he was seething with anger and he knew Sidious could feel it.

"I am vastly displeased with your doubts," Sidious said, getting up from his throne. "I can see now that no thought of the power you could achieve with the Dark Side of the Force will induce you to rid yourself of your main vulnerability. If you are tempted at any time while I am away from the Command Ship to attempt to defect from your apprenticeship or not to complete any of the tasks I have given you, remember this."

With that, he lifted his hands and sent vicious bolts of lightening directly towards Vader's chest area where his life support system was centralized. Vader could feel the lightening burning his brand new skin but even worse; he could feel himself choking as his air supply was cut off due to the damage to his life support. Was this how Padme had felt that time on Mustafar when he had choked her, he wondered? He staggered and fell heavily to the floor. Although he knew it was not Sidious' intention to kill him then and there, it was a ghastly feeling not to be able to breathe. His chest felt like there was iron bands wrapped around it that prevented him from expanding his ribs. His lungs seemed on fire, as though he was breathing in the hot volcanic ash of Mustafar once more. Maybe he was on Mustafar again and still on fire, he thought, beginning to hallucinate from lack of oxygen. Maybe he had never left that place. Perhaps he was still on fire and would burn forever.

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Padme was looking out of the main portal, remembering all the places she had loved the most. They had all been near water. On Naboo, she had loved the lake country. On Alderaan, the Palace grounds had been near a beautiful lake. In Sashwan, her cottage home had been right on the shores of the best lake for a day's swimming she had encountered. Even her little getaway place that she had visited when she had wanted a holiday from the pressures of public life had been on a tiny island in a vast ocean on a small planet in an insignificant solar system. The water surrounding the island had been translucent and shallow and warm. With the vivid blue sky reflecting off the silvery sand, it had turned the water a stunning pale turquoise colour. It was beautiful to swim in. Funny creatures called turtles and dolphins had visited the waters. Microscopic creatures had built colourful kingdoms that the locals called 'coral' just under the water's surface. The fish were iridescent and plentiful. Each one was a miniature work of abstract art in surreal colour. They flashed in and out of the coral playground in an almost hypnotizing dance of grace and beauty.

She smiled. She was learning to go to these places mentally, to remember them in great detail. She did not want to forget what places other than the inside of their suite looked like. She could remember the sun on her skin and the silky feel of water against her limbs. She remembered bobbing out in the sea beyond where the waves broke and the taste of salt water on her lips. She remembered a dolphin that had played with her for hours out there beyond the breakers. Anything she did, the dolphin would imitate. As the sun went down, his family pod had called him home. With a cheerful cricky noise of farewell, he had swum off to join them. Padme had waved until they disappeared and then swum back in for an evening feast of island food with liberal amounts of tropical fruit, coconut and coal roasted fish.

The Islanders had been happy, relaxed people with dark hair and brown skin and wide smiles. They loved music and dancing, and Padme had even learned a few graceful moves from the young girls on the island. She had always been happy there regardless of what was happening in the world of Galactic politics. She had made friends on the island who invited her into their homes each time she visited. She missed seeing them. Padme sighed. She missed seeing a lot of people.

At that moment the main door to their adjoined suite slid open and Padme turned, expecting to see Anakin in his armour and mask. Instead, she saw the hideously scarred Palpatine (Obi Wan had told her a long time ago that his Sith name was Darth Sidious) carrying the powerful form of her husband in a fireman's hold. Anakin was completely limp, obviously unconscious.

Padme gasped and ran over to them. "What have you done to Anakin?" she demanded furiously, her brown eyes looking with fear at the lifeless form of her husband.

"Get out of the way. He needs medical attention," Sidious replied callously, turning to carry his apprentice in to the medical niche.

"What did you do to him, you monster!" Padme yelled, looking like she was just about to launch herself on Sidious, completely unarmed.

Without saying another word, Sidious turned back and with a flick of his hand, sent Padme flying against the door jamb. She knocked her head hard on the edge and slumped unconscious to the floor.

With Padme out of the way, Sidious carefully placed his unconscious apprentice on the medical bed and switched on the medical droid. Within seconds the helmet and mask was off. In the pressurized room, Anakin could suddenly breathe again. He coughed violently and took a deep, ragged breath much like a victim of drowning. Within seconds, he was fully conscious again.

"Repair his life support and make sure he rests until he's fit again," Sidious said to the medical droid and left, stepping over Padme's still unconscious form in the doorway.

Anakin felt sick and groggy, and he knew he had bad burns over much of his skin. "Where is Padme?" Anakin asked the droid almost immediately. "Find her for me," he commanded.

The medical droid floated out of the door and then came back almost immediately. "She is unconscious in the doorway, my Lord," he reported.

"What?" Anakin said and then instantly regretted shouting. He had a monstrous headache. He got up immediately and went to find her. Sure enough, her small form was crumpled near the doorway. Agonizingly, he picked her up, wincing as his burns protested. He carried her back to the medical niche. "What is wrong with her?" he demanded, as he placed her on the bed he had just been lying on. He was most afraid that she had tried to escape but it didn't make sense because she knew she wouldn't make it with the implanted slave device.

The droid did a cursory examination. "It appears she has had quite a nasty blow to the head," the droid said politely.

White hot anger speared through Anakin's brain. "Sidious," he muttered under his breath. He was helpless to take his revenge and Sidious knew it. Anakin took a few deep breaths.

"How serious is it?" he asked.

"She'll wake up in a little while. She'll have a nasty bruise for awhile and a bit of swelling but there doesn't appear to be any permanent damage to the skull or brain," the droid said. "She'll have a headache for quite awhile."

"That makes two of us," Anakin said but his eyes were fixed anxiously on his wife's unconscious face as he waited for her to wake up.

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Anakin stayed beside Padme for hours, watching for when she would open her eyes again. The medical droid insisted he take off his armour so that it could treat the burns.

"Will it scar?" Anakin asked quietly, not taking his eyes off Padme as he sat there while the droid put ointment on the raw patches.

"No, the burns are not deep enough. Your skin will be as good as new," the droid said reassuringly, patting some kind of powder over the ointment he had just applied.

Anakin sighed with relief. He did not want to go through any more skin graft surgery.

Just then Padme's eyes opened. She looked confused for a few minutes and then suddenly said, "Anakin!" and sat up quickly. She immediately fell back onto the bed with a groan as pain stabbed through her head.

"I'm here, Padme. It's okay, everything is okay," Anakin said soothingly, stroking her hair with one burnt hand.

"What did he do? What did Sidious do to you?" Padme asked, frowning at the throbbing that went from one side of her head to the other.

Anakin glanced away for a moment. "I'll tell you one day when you're better, Padme. He was angry with me but I don't want you to worry now with that head injury."

"Are you okay?" she asked, her large brown eyes darting anxiously over his face. "You're burnt! And when Sidious brought you in here, you were unconscious."

"Calm down, Padme. I'm fine. I did get burnt but the droid said that they're not deep burns. I was unconscious because my life support failed and I couldn't breathe but I'm okay now," he explained. He could see that Padme would not rest or relax until she knew he was going to be alright.

Padme relaxed slightly. "Good, I'm glad you're alright." She put one hand up to her temple. "I seem to get a lot of head injuries when I'm here," she said with a weak smile. Anakin knew she was referring to the first time she had been there with the head injury she had sustained in the asteroid field.

"I think it's a habit you should break," Anakin joked with a lop-sided smile.

"You need to tell me why Sidious attacked you," Padme said, her eyes were pools of concern as she looked at him.

"I will but when you are fully recovered," he promised.

In the meantime, the droid had been setting up a temporary stretcher bed for Anakin next to Padme's. "You need to lie down and rest after being unconscious," the droid said sternly, gesturing for Anakin to get into the bed.

With a rueful look at Padme, he did as he was bid. After he was settled and the droid was satisfied, his hand crept out from under his covers and found Padme's in the next bed. Holding hands, they both fell into a painful and drugged sleep.

Chapter 14

NB — There is a large jump forwards in time in this chapter — it's well marked so you won't miss it. The jump is essential to my plan to stay as much inside the Canon as I can, even in an AU fiction. Also, I think it's far more realistic that the problems between Anakin and Padme are not worked out quickly even taking into account Anakin's recent revelations. The missing chunk of time could be written into the fic but it would extend the story out far too long, mess up the pacing and would also add nothing to the development of the plot or characters that we haven't seen already. Again, thanks to those who have been kind enough to review and leave feedback. It's always fun to hear some of the really great ideas people have. I actually completed the fiction a few days ago so I know how it ends (and no, I'm not telling!). I really wish some of you would write your great ideas into your own fics because they would make fantastic new stories to add to the fanon. Thanks again, guys!

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Understand the things I say, don't turn away from me

'Cause I've lived half my life out there, you wouldn't disagree

Do you see me, do you like me?

Do you notice, do know?

Does anyone care?

Understand what I've become, it wasn't my design"

— Cranberries, Ode To My Family

Both Padme and Anakin recovered fairly quickly. Anakin was busy for several days once back on his feet, setting up the projects that Sidious had given him. He knew he could not waste any time if he was to complete them before Sidious came back. He hired a legion of new workers on the Death Star and set specific time limits for each section that had to be completed. He also employed more engineers to supervise the work. If there were any faults in the Death Star when Sidious came back, Anakin knew the price he would pay. He also sent out recruitment scouts to round up the most talented space flight engineers and weaponry engineers they could find. It would take a very skilled team to create a faster and more capable fighter ship, and the best minds in the Galaxy to create a weapon with enough fire power to destroy a planet.

Every day when Anakin went back to his suite, he was reminded why he was doing this. Padme had a painful bruise across her temple and cheekbone that didn't fade completely for weeks. Anakin's own burns took a couple of weeks to lose their sting despite the daily application of burn ointment and antiseptic powder by the medical droid. Every time he moved in his armour, he remembered the consequences of disobedience.

Padme didn't press him as to the reasons for Sidious' displeasure. Anakin had promised to explain to her in time and she didn't want to put pressure on him when he was so obviously

preoccupied and stressed.

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Over the next year, Anakin would involve Padme in the new ship's design. She had been with him for almost a year already and he was more comfortable with the idea of giving her access to some of the more minor Empire secrets. After all, if she was going to try to escape or if the Jedi remnant were going to try and rescue her, it would have happened by now. The design secrets of the new ship would not be much of a secret to take back to the Rebel Alliance. It would take too long and be too expensive to build for such a small group. Besides that, it was unlikely that once their own fleet of the new ships was built, the Rebel Alliance couldn't very quickly learn its engineering secrets from seeing it in action.

Padme had been (and still was) an excellent pilot. She understood aircraft engineering from a military point of view and knew what was practically possible and what wasn't. Anakin built the simulator in the rooms next to his own and expanded the boundaries of her slave device to allow her to run through various scenarios there. She was quite happy to test the instruments and make suggestions for improvements. For Padme, it was almost like her old life while she was in there.

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Once all the projects were up and running and also were running to schedule, Anakin seemed to relax slightly. He spent more time in their suite supervising work via the hologram messenger rather than feeling as though he had to be there personally at all hours.

One evening after they had actually been able to eat dinner together for once and Anakin didn't have to rush off to supervise some important stage of the building of the fighter ship (or whatever else it was that Sidious had given him to do), Padme broached the question she had put off for the last six months since the Emperor had last been there.

"You never told me why Sidious attacked you," she said gently, looking at him searchingly.

Anakin sighed. "I did promise to tell you about that, didn't I?" he asked with a wry smile. It was at times like these that Anakin looked almost like his boyish self again. He was not even quite 28 yet and on the rare occasions when he smiled, he looked very young to Padme. Anakin took a deep breath. Padme was not going to like this.

"Sidious wanted me to kill you, as you know. I refused and he was angry. But it was more than that Padme. It shook my faith in Sidious," he said seriously, his sky blue eyes turned inward as he remembered that devastating period when he began to realize the truth. "I realized for the first time that Sidious did not have my best interests at heart."

Padme was tempted to roll her eyes and say, "really?" very sarcastically but she did not want to interrupt Anakin when he was telling her something that was obviously very important to him.

"And then I thought to myself — well, if he doesn't have my best interests at heart perhaps he may not have the best interests of the Empire at heart either," he continued.

Padme's interest was well and truly caught now. Her eyes narrowed and she frowned slightly as she concentrated on what he was saying. Could he finally have woken up to all that

Sidious was, she wondered hopefully?

"Then I thought about the past few years as his apprentice and how he had promised to bring peace to the Galaxy with the Empire. I realized that the Galaxy had had more wars and seen more death in this time than in any other time in its history. How then was he keeping his promise? I realized that maybe it had been a sham all along. Perhaps he had always just wanted power for his own purposes. The other Jedi saw it long before the Republic fell. I had thought the Jedi Council was afraid of losing their influence in the Republic because Palpatine did not trust them. I thought that's why they were suspicious of him. I realized on Sidious' last visit that the Jedi may simply have seen his lust for power over the Republic long before I did."

Padme felt a bit surreal. For so long, she had wanted to hear Anakin say these things but she had stopped believing he ever would. Now that he was, she was stunned into silence.

"But there is worse, Padme," he said, glancing at her intent face and then looking away again. "I realized for the first time why I hadn't seen what the Jedi had seen. I realized how Palpatine had lured me, slowly and carefully, to the Dark Side of the Force. I realized how easy it had been for him, in a sense. I was vulnerable to him for all sorts of reasons that I've only just understood."

He paused and took a deep breath. "I had doubts, Padme; very, very serious doubts. Suddenly everything that I thought I knew crumbled around me like dust. The only person that I thought I could trust completely suddenly seemed to have become my greatest enemy. And the people that I thought were my enemies, suddenly seemed to have understood everything that I was blind to. I was no longer sure that I was doing the right thing with my life anymore. The worst of it is that I'm bound to the one person that I now trust the least. I can't free myself."

He glanced back at his wife, waiting for her reaction. He knew she would be pleased with his doubts.

"Sidious punished you for your doubts?" Padme asked but it was more like a statement.

Anakin merely nodded.

"How did he know if you didn't tell him?" Padme asked curiously but she had her suspicions.

"As I said, there is a bond between a Sith Master and his apprentice. He knew that I had you here from the other side of the Galaxy. He felt it. I think he felt my doubts because it meant that I had lost a great deal of my passion for our shared plans. He could feel that through the Force," Anakin explained, watching her changing facial expressions.

Padme was not pleased to share her husband's soul with a foul monster like Sidious. On the other hand, it was good that Anakin had lost his passion for his master's plans.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I have to stay here and finish my apprenticeship, Padme. I don't have any other choice," Anakin said simply. He knew she wasn't going to like it.

"You have other choices, Anakin. I think that although you distrust Sidious, he can still offer you something that you want," she said flatly.

Anakin pressed his lips together. She was right but only partly.

"These things that made you vulnerable to Palpatine's lies, what were they?" Padme asked softly.

Anakin examined his wife's beautiful face. If she was to ever forgive him completely for all his actions, she would need to understand the truth. But it was hard to tell her. She was the one person that he didn't wish to appear weak or gullible in front of. Telling her the truth about his past and how it made him feel and how it led to the choices he had made would be one of the hardest things he would ever do. He had the same feeling as he had when he had shown Padme what was behind Vader's mask. He couldn't guess her reaction but it was a risk he had to take.

Slowly, painfully, Anakin outlined his past experiences as a child slave on Tatooine and as a Padawan. He kept his eyes lowered as he described how it had made him feel, how it had affected his outlook on life and how it had made him vulnerable to Palpatine's interest and approval. He got angry when he remembered how hard the Jedi Council had been on him when he was doing his best and how fed up he had been with the constant criticism. At that time, Palpatine had been his only source of positive feedback.

He also confessed how hard it was for him not to cling to any good thing that came into his life and how it had led to his jealousy over her and finally, his fear for her life had been the final push into Sidious' clutches.

When he finally finished explaining it all, he looked up to see tears running down Padme's face. "I'm so sorry, Anakin," she whispered. "No-one should have a life that starts that way. No wonder you were afraid and so vulnerable."

She got up from her chair and went to sit next to Anakin on the couch. She put her slender arms around him and her head on his shoulder. "It does explain so much," she said softly.

He slipped one arm around her and pulled her close against him. Although it had been horrible to have to relive it all in order to tell Padme, in the end he was glad he had. He placed a kiss on top of her head and they sat embracing for a long time.

The year went quickly for Anakin. There was so much work to do that he was racing against time. He was satisfied with progress however. He knew everything would be ready in time. Sidious would have no reason to be displeased.

He knew the rest of his life would probably be like this now. Sidious would drive him harder and harder. The more he achieved, the more would be asked of him. But he couldn't fail. He just couldn't fail.

Thirteen years pass...

The next thirteen years passed in very much in the same manner. Sidious would turn up at the Command Ship at regular intervals and put his apprentice through his paces. Darth Vader continued to grow and develop in the Dark Side of the Force but he knew his master was holding him back somewhat. Sidious no longer trusted his apprentice any more than Darth Vader trusted his master. As the years went on, Sidious' demands became increasingly heavy but Vader's development with the Dark Side compensated for the extra pressure. In short, Vader became more capable over time of meeting his master's demands.

Both Darth Sidious and Darth Vader watched the Rebel Alliance grow over this period with a watchful and wary attention. It was hardly a strong enough or large enough group to really threaten the Empire that they had built but they were capable of greatly inconveniencing the Emperor's plans at times. They seemed to have a talent for knowing exactly how to create a small amount of damage in order to generate an enormous amount of difficulty.

It was obvious that the group had access to top level military and diplomatic training. Whoever was teaching them their skills was certainly experienced, Anakin thought often to himself with impatience. He had no idea that his own wife was responsible for the sophistication of the Rebel Alliance's strategy. The Alliance was still using the training units she had written on Naboo, and in Dagobah and Sashwan. If he had known however, he would not have been surprised.

There were days when he was furious at the damage they wrought and paced their suite with a dark expression as he watched the damage play out on his hologram messaging system. When Padme asked what was making him so angry, he only had to say, "the Alliance" and she knew what he was referring to. At times like this, she would smile gleefully to herself. It was no secret that Padme thought any strike against the Empire a good one. It infuriated Anakin.

Despite these differences of view, Padme and Anakin grew very close over this long period. They only had each other for emotional sustenance, Anakin because of his position so close to the Emperor and Padme because she almost never saw anybody else.

Of course, there were times when Padme resented this bitterly. Her life had once involved so many people — too many people, she sometimes thought. She was good at attracting loyalty and support from those around her. She knew her handmaidens had served her so well because they had loved her. She had loved them too. She knew them very well. She knew all the members of their families, had visited their homes, had met their friends, knew their individual tastes, remembered their birthdays and understood their personalities. They had known her just as well. There were times she still missed them fiercely although she had learned to live with the loss. She had learned to live with a lot of loss over the past decade.

She was used to running a household of staff as well as having a large staff to manage in her diplomatic headquarters both on Naboo and at the Senate. They looked to her to be kind and generous, and she did not let them down.

She remembered one day seeing an elderly man taking hologram readers to the library in the Naboo Palace. She knew he had a job working in the library and had worked there a long time. "Corde, do you know how long that gentleman has worked in the Palace library?" she had asked one of her handmaidens.

"No but I can find out, your majesty," Corde said.

"Corde, you're supposed to call me Padme when there is no-one else around," Padme had scolded gently with a laugh.

"Sorry Padme," Corde had said with a smile and left to find out what Padme had wanted to know.

Later in the day she had told Padme that he had worked there for over forty years.

"Find out what he needs and wants most," Padme had asked Corde with a thoughtful expression.

"Yes Padme," Corde had said with a pleased smile.

It turned out he had an elderly mother but he couldn't afford a nurse to take care of her while he was at work all day. Padme called him in and gave him a pay rise but also offered to pay for a nurse for his mother for as long as she lived. She also gave him a beautiful painting of the lakes on Naboo with an inscription "in thanks for all your years of faithful service to the people of Naboo". It broke her heart when he almost started crying with gratitude. After all, it was a drop in the ocean of what needed to be done for people on Naboo and it was little enough.

His reaction had stayed with Padme however and she learned how little kindness and recognition it took to make another happy. Power was a constructive thing, if used wisely.

Padme came back to the present with a small shake of the head and looked around the empty suite. She had not seen power used constructively or wisely for a long time. There were times she almost forgot such a thing was possible anymore. All was darkness around herself and Anakin, and it had not alleviated in fifteen long years.

She was getting old, she thought ruefully. Her mirror showed half a dozen grey strands in her hair. It was not surprising, considering she was nearly 45 years of age. Anakin was 40 and had only started showing a strand of two of grey as well. She had fine lines around her eyes when she smiled but she had not smiled often over the past decade and a half. She was too anxious over Anakin's welfare, working so closely with a spiteful and dangerous Sith Lord. She also still felt grief over not seeing her children grow up. She knew that would never leave her. In a way, she didn't want it to. The thought of Leia and Luke brought pain but it was a pain tinged with sweetness. She knew they were out there somewhere living with more freedom than she herself had enjoyed for a long time.

There were days when she just didn't want to speak to Anakin. She got fed up with being kept under lock and key like a dangerous animal and the walls of her suite seemed to crowd in on her. She would retire to her suite at those times and Anakin learned to leave her to herself until she felt like speaking again.

He hated those periods passionately. Not only was he cut off from his one real source of happiness but he felt guilty and conflicted as well. There was a strong and growing part of him that wanted to take the damn slave device out of her neck but there was still a stronger part that did not want her to leave him for good. If she promised to stay, he would take it out. He knew she was a woman of her word but she would not give her word. He had tried to extract it from her on many occasions but each time, she had refused to promise.

"Every prisoner has the right to try and escape, Anakin," she had said uncompromisingly once. "I feel like I'm going mad some days. There are times I just want to see blue sky and green grass just one more time. I just want to go swimming in a lake again and feel cool water and warm sun on my skin. I'm tired of being your little dress-up doll. I know you give me projects to keep me amused but both of us know we're on different sides of the political spectrum and that I would fight to destroy your Empire if I could."

Anakin had been taken aback. "If I wanted a dress-up doll, I wouldn't have chosen one that bites," Anakin had replied sulkily.

Padme bared her white teeth at him with a laugh. "Come over here then and I'll take a chunk out of you!" she'd said with amusement.

He'd laughed and the fight had been over but he knew where he stood. He would not move her nor change her and he couldn't risk setting her free of the slave device.

Other times she was fairly happy to be with him. He would come back after a trip away and tell her all about the planets he had visited. He was good at describing them. He would tell her about what it looked like and what the creatures on the planet were like. He'd tell funny stories about the planet's inhabitants which would make her laugh.

Towards the end of her forty-fifth year, Padme grew very quiet. Her few strands of grey hair alerted her to the passing of time much more so than the standardized Galaxy calendar. The stars outside their portals did not change. She did not see morning, noon and night any longer. She did not experience seasons, the phases of a moon or the tides. She felt in a kind of floating limbo-land and for most of that time and she had thought constantly of escape and what she would do when she got away all these years.

She had harboured some hopes at one point that Anakin may run away with her to another Galaxy much further away than Fornax in order to escape Sidious. She had given up that hope. Whether Anakin wanted to admit it or not, he was conflicted about leaving his Sith life behind. He liked being the second most powerful man in the Galaxy. He did not want to start again as a nobody in a strange system. He had worked hard to become as powerful as he was. He did not really want to give it all up.

But now that she could see the effects of time on herself, she could no longer hold out any hope that her life would ever be any different. She was doomed to spend her remaining years with a slave device in her neck within the same walls that had contained her for well over a decade.

The thought made her quiet and withdrawn. It was hard to let go of hope. It was hard to acknowledge that time lost would not be redeemed. It was particularly difficult to think of all the things she could have done but would now never get the chance. In some ways, it was just as well she had done so much at such a young age. She would not die one day thinking her whole life had been a waste as the past fifteen years had been and as the years to come would be too.

Chapter 15

Okay, I'm a little disturbed that some of you guys think 40 and 45 is old — LOL! At this age, both Padme and Anakin will live for at least another 30 to 40 years! And there is plenty of action to come, I promise...

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Its a fire, these dreams they pass me by
This salvation I desire, keeps getting me down
Cos we need to recognise mistakes, for time and again
So let it be known for what we believe in
I can see no reason for it to fail...
Cos this life is a farce, I can’t breathe through this mask like a fool
So breathe on”

— Portishead, It’s a Fire

Anakin came into their suites later than usual one rest period. Padme looked over at him and smiled. “I’m getting old, Ani. I can’t stand all this new music,” she said, gesturing to the discordant noise coming out of the music station on the messaging device.

“I think the idea is that you’re supposed to take drugs when you listen to it,” Anakin said through his mask. His wry tone was not caught by the artificial voice.

“Ah! That would explain my problem,” Padme said and switched it off with a relieved expression.

Anakin went through to his medical niche and removed his helmet and armour. It had been a long day. The Rebel Alliance had successfully launched an attack against the Star Destroyer, Anakin’s latest project in fighter ships. The Star Destroyer had swallowed up the small Rebel Ship Tantive IV and he had been unable to extract any information from the captured rebel ship’s Captain. He had choked him to death in the end. A certain Princess Leia had been also been captured on board but he had her put into a prison cell. He would question her later with an interrogation droid. He had had enough for one day. Besides, it was hard to face questioning the Princess for some reason. She was young and although she had behaved with great courage and self-possession, he sensed her youthful vulnerability. In some ways, she reminded him of Padme as a young Queen. It would be hard to make himself do anything to hurt her. He hoped she just spoke of her own accord.

“What’s worrying you?” Padme asked Anakin gently, as he took a sip of red wine with his dinner. He didn’t often drink alcohol because he said it made it harder to use the Force. Occasionally, when he had had a particularly bad day or it was a special celebration, he had one small glass of wine.

Padme wondered how many times she had asked Anakin that question in the time she had known him. It seemed like there was always something bothering him.

"We captured our first Rebel ship today," Anakin said bluntly. He knew Padme would not be pleased.

She wasn't. "Were there any survivors?" she asked, almost not wanting to know.

"We captured a Princess Leia," Anakin replied, feeling troubled again at the thought of the young woman.

He suddenly felt a stab of fear so strongly that he winced. He realized almost instantly that it came from Padme. He looked up sharply. Sure enough, her face was pale and her hands shook as she picked up a glass of water from the table.

"Do you know her?" he asked sharply.

"I've heard of her," Padme replied faintly. She knew she would have to concoct a series of lies now to throw Anakin off the scent.

"From where?" he asked with a frown.

"I did have contacts in the Rebel Alliance when I was free, Anakin," Padme said and then clenched her slender jaw and looked away.

"Who is she?" he demanded.

"The child of a friend of Yoda and Obi Wan," she said, stretching the truth a little.

"She's dangerous," Anakin said flatly.

"I'm glad," Padme said defiantly. "The Rebel Alliance needs strong young people like Princess Leia."

Anakin stood up and began to pace. Padme knew it was a bad sign.

"She's stubborn. She won't talk," he muttered.

"Good," Padme said, proud she had a daughter that did not give in to fear.

"I will have to torture the information out of her. It would be easier all around if she would just talk," Anakin said angrily.

Padme's back stiffened and she clenched her hands into fists. "If you enjoy torturing young woman..." she began contemptuously.

"No, I don't enjoy it, if you must know," Anakin said, whirling around on her and leaning over the table with his face close to hers.

"Don't try and intimidate me, Anakin," Padme said, pushing him away. "I've known you too long for it to work on me."

Anakin stood back and looked down at her with a tense face. "She reminds me of you... When you were a young Queen and I was still a little boy who thought you looked like an angel," he said, suddenly quiet.

Again, he detected a ripple of fear in Padme.

"If she is royal and a young woman, that is hardly surprising," Padme said more calmly. Padme took a deep breath. "Are you planning to kill her?" she asked.

"No," Anakin replied flatly. "I'm not sure I could," he admitted. He knew he would keep seeing Padme's fourteen-year-old face in front of him if he tried to kill this young woman.

Padme let her breath out. "It would not be wise. The Rebel Alliance is strong enough to damage one of your Star Destroyers, and they could and would seek revenge for her death. I don't think Sidious would be pleased with the consequences if you killed her," Padme said reasonably. It was all she could do for her daughter now. She felt so damn helpless.

"Grand Moff Tarkin will probably decide her fate if she doesn't talk," Anakin said.

Padme turned her tense face away from Anakin. Was all this hiding her children from Anakin only going to end in him killing them rather than turning them to the Dark Side? And which was the worse fate for them? Padme didn't know.

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Despite earnest attempts to explain to Princess Leia the gravity of her situation, the stubborn young woman refused to talk. Although there was still something about her that reminded Vader of a young Padme, he realized their personalities were completely different. Princess Leia was mouthy and feisty. Padme had always been very cool and restrained; a perfect counterpart of Anakin's own hot-headed, passionate nature.

Princess Leia was immensely frustrating to deal with. In the end, he sent his interrogation droid in and left the room. He did not want to be there while the young woman was tortured.

When he went back to their suite at next rest period, he did not tell Padme what he had had to do. She did not ask either. She obviously did not want to know.

Padme was distracted and distant. Anakin could guess why. It was just one more thing between them, keeping them apart even while living together so closely.

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"Do you remember Alderaan?" Anakin asked over their rest period meal a few days later.

Padme nodded. "I love Alderaan. It's beautiful," she said, smiling as she remembered.

"Was beautiful," Anakin said.

Padme examined his face. He looked very moody. Something had obviously happened. "What do you mean 'was'?" she asked suspiciously.

"Grand Moff Tarkin decided to test the Death Star," Anakin said. "On Alderaan."

Padme drew in her breath sharply and stared at Anakin with horrified eyes.

"The Death Star worked. Alderaan is no more," he said, looking down at the table, his still-handsome face tense.

Padme felt the blood drain from her face. The Palace was no more? The kind King and Queen were no more? The lake and the mountains and the blue sky were gone forever? Padme remembered that the planet had literally billions of inhabitants. None of them would have survived unless they were visiting another system.

"How could you allow something so evil?" Padme breathed, her face white and shocked.

"Tarkin thought it would make Princess Leia talk," Anakin said tensely. "But it didn't. She tried to save Alderaan by lying about where the Rebel base was but Tarkin decided to test the weapon on Alderaan anyway. I didn't realize he was really going to do it until it was too late."

"Billions of people this time, Ani — billions!" Padme said, shaking her head in bewilderment. "When is this going to stop? When are you going to finally know that no amount of power is worth this?"

She got up and walked away from the table.

"I can't anticipate when my generals are going to go mad and do something like that Padme," Anakin said through clenched teeth.

"Those billions of people would be alive if you hadn't built the damn Death Star," Padme argued.

And you would be dead if I hadn't, Anakin thought, suddenly feeling very weary.

"The Imperial Senate is no more, Padme," he told her, tactically changing the subject. "Tarkin ordered its dissolution when the Death Star was finally finished."

"There hasn't been a Senate since Palpatine took control of it over twenty years ago," Padme said with scorn.

"Tarkin has consolidated all the Senate's powers under the Emperor now," Anakin continued.

"This Galaxy has been an Empire for over two decades, Anakin. Nobody has pretended any differently other than Sidious' own puppets and henchmen," Padme said derisively.

"Well, now it's official," Anakin said.

Padme looked at him sharply. He sounded drained, almost like he didn't care anymore.

"This is all good news for you. Why don't you look happier?" she asked acerbically.

Suddenly, Anakin was vividly reminded of Princess Leia. It was exactly like something that exasperating young woman would have said.

"Believe it or not Padme, I haven't enjoyed any of this," he said his gaze far away.

"Then you should do something to stop it," she said impatiently.

Suddenly he glared at her out of angry blue eyes. "Do you think I wouldn't if I could?" he asked through clenched teeth. "I'm tired of all the death and misery too, Padme. But if I fail in any of these things, Sidious will kill you! I won't let that happen," he said vehemently.

Padme looked at him with sad eyes. "It's only one life as against billions, Anakin. And it's not just those who died on Alderaan, it's the millions of others who have died in the past fifteen or twenty years. When does it stop?"

"Do you want to die?" he asked furiously, tears coming to his eyes.

"I've been living in a coffin for a long time," she said with a shrug, looking around their suite.

"Is that how you see living with me?" Anakin asked, getting up. He was bitterly hurt.

"No Anakin, it's not about you. It's about not having any freedom," she said gently.

Anakin pressed his lips together and turned his back on Padme. Why couldn't she see that allowing her to die, allowing her to be away from him in any sense was just the one thing he could not do?

Padme went over to him and put her arms around him. His bowed shoulders and distraught expression always pierced through her defenses. Nothing had changed since Tatooine when he had killed an entire village of Sandpeople in vengeance and then wanted pity. Padme's heart still broke every time she saw him unhappy. She pressed her face against the warmth of his back and breathed in his familiar scent. Eventually he turned around and lifting her chin with one hand, he bent his head to kiss her.

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A few days later, Vader heard a report that there was a foreign ship on board. After checking briefly with his officers that it wasn't a false alarm he suddenly sensed it — a presence he hadn't felt in a long, long time. After issuing some instructions, he paced nervously in the command room until the Force told him it was time to move.

It was not long after that he felt drawn to the hallway leading to the main forward bay. Obi Wan's presence was so strong that he could almost smell him. Sure enough, as he stepped around the corner he saw his old master.

It was both painful and infuriating to see Obi Wan again. Vader's emotions were so powerful that he felt overwhelmed. Once again, he could feel all his old anger and confusion at his master's strictness and criticism. It was like being fifteen again. But more powerful than any other emotion was rage. This was the man who had kept his wife from him for years by hiding her. This was the man who had taken his wife away from him again just after he had found her once more. He had sworn that he would kill Obi Wan one day just for that one act and now, he would.

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When Anakin went back to his rooms that night, Padme could tell instantly that something profound had happened to him while he was away.

"What is it?" she asked with a frown when he came back into the suite from his medical niche without his mask or armour.

"Obi Wan was here today with members of the Rebel Alliance. They rescued Princess Leia," he said in an odd voice.

"She's safe?" Padme breathed, hardly daring to believe it was true.

"She's certainly escaped Tarkin's clutches," Anakin said in the same odd voice.

Padme frowned at him. "There's more than that, isn't there?"

"Obi Wan is dead," he said directly and tensed for her response.

"You killed him," she said, anger already creeping in her voice. "You killed him! The best friend we ever had and you murdered him!"

"He wasn't my friend!" Anakin shouted. "He kept you away from me. He interfered in our marriage constantly. He hounded and criticized me all the time. He drove me into Palpatine's clutches!"

"Grow up, Anakin! It's time for you to take responsibility for your own actions. You're forty years old, for goodness sake! I know terrible things happened to you that made you vulnerable to Palpatine's lies and charm but don't blame Obi Wan for it! He was always trying to help you, most particularly when he sounded critical. You've had plenty of time to fix the mistakes of the past but you've chosen not to because deep down, you like being powerful and important. Well, that's your choice and I may not like it but I won't have Obi Wan blamed for the messes you've made!" Padme yelled right back. "As for hiding me from you, he did that because I asked him to and I asked him to because I didn't want to spend fifteen years with a slave device in my neck!"

Anakin reacted as though he had been slapped. Padme's temper was so rare that it was always a shock.

He watched as she turned on her heel and left the room. For the first time in well over ten years, she closed and locked the adjoining door between their suites. He knew he wouldn't see her for a long time.

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Once locked in her suite, Padme didn't know whether to feel relieved about Leia or to cry for Obi Wan. In the end, her tears won. She knew that Leia was alive because Obi Wan had let himself be killed.

She knew Yoda would disapprove of her tears. He would say, "a natural part of life, death is. Those who are gone, miss them do not, grieve them do not. They are now part of the Force." She was selfish though. She had wanted to see Obi Wan and Yoda again some day. She missed them. She could remember Obi Wan as a young Padawan when they had visited Tatooine and met Anakin for the first time. She remembered him as Anakin's Jedi Master, all gentle wry humour and unfailingly polite manners. She had no idea how he had changed in the meantime while he had been watching over Luke on Tatooine. He would have been in his early to mid-fifties during his last encounter with Anakin. She missed him. She missed them all.

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Vader could not let himself get distracted by Padme's absence. The Rebel Alliance was proving an even bigger problem now even with Obi Wan gone. In his heart of hearts, he was glad that Leia had not been executed. It would have haunted him in a way that the others he had killed had not. He still wasn't sure why except there was something about her of Padme as a teenage Queen.

It was not long after Obi Wan's death that the Rebel Alliance made their attack on the Death Star. Vader had been anticipating it. He was sure they would use the stolen plans to find a vulnerable spot. He knew the Death Star did not have many but it was impossible to build anything without some structural weakness somewhere.

When he saw a rebel fleet come in and head for a canyon on the Death Star, he realized what strategy they were going to use very quickly. He decided to tackle this situation personally. He had a premonition that something significant was going to happen.

He found picking the Rebel Fleet off very easy. He flew in formation with his two best fighter pilots. His heartbeat did not even increase as he calmly shot the rebel ships. He felt very centred in the Force.

It was not until he reached a final rebel ship that was careering down the canyon toward the vulnerable port that something odd shifted in the Force. He could feel... yes, he could feel a Jedi was piloting the ship but which one? He knew Obi Wan was dead and it was definitely not Yoda; he would have recognized Yoda through the Force.

And yet, there was something achingly familiar about this Jedi. Something so intensely familiar and yet he could not locate who it was. There should be no Jedi in the Galaxy that he was not aware of. With Obi Wan gone, that only left Yoda. Yet, the Jedi piloting the ship had had at least some preliminary training although he was obviously very young in the Force. Could it be one of the new weak breed of Younglings that Sidious had mentioned to him as much as ten or fifteen years ago now? They would be the right age but Vader could sense this one was strong with the Force, very strong. If Sidious had sensed the presence of this young man as a Youngling, he would have recruited him for sure.

Despite the young man's talent, Vader was easily able to get him within sights. Just as he was about to fire, his ship was unexpectedly attacked from above. Vader was angry with himself. He had been so caught up in trying to figure out who this young Jedi was that he had not been paying enough attention. He would suffer for it now, he knew.

His ship started spiraling out of control and he span into deep space. Using all his power with the Force, he wrenched the ship's steering in the direction of the Command Ship. If he could just get the ship within range of its gravitational pull, he would be sucked into the hanger and safe.

Chapter 16

I think this is the chapter that regular readers of this fic have been waiting for, in a sense — LOL! Anyway, there is some dialogue lifted directly from the original movie trilogy and I'm acknowledging that here. I've tried to avoid taking too much from the original trilogy in the chapters to come so unless you know the storyline, there will be many gaps in the action. I've assumed anyone who is enough of a fan to read fan fiction is familiar enough with the movies to follow along regardless.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Is there somewhere, I could separate this feeling from memory
disconnect myself from me
desire inside to mistreat you, it pushes words out of my mouth
this cyclical pattern I feed you, the back and forth and up and down
but still here you are
relinquishing hope for the future, I try not to hate it so
but you are a bridge to those memories, I try to forget if you only knew
is there somewhere to occupy emotion, a room to keep my rage away from you
just tell me when these hopeless days are over
I’ll open my eyes and see my new sun rise”

— Sixpence None the Richer, Disconnected

Padme heard a polite knocking on her locked suite door. “Milady, I just wanted to let you know that your husband Lord Vader has been seriously injured in battle,” the thin voice of the medical droid said using the voice transmitter into her rooms.

Padme dropped the library reader she was holding and got up from her couch immediately. She unlocked the door and ran through to the medical niche near Anakin’s bedroom, following the hovering droid.

Sure enough, Anakin was lying unconscious on the medical bed. His head had a nasty gash across the forehead, his nose was broken and swollen and if one of his arms had not been mechanical, it would have been broken. As it was, some minor repairs and stitches in the skin layer was all that was required.

“What happened?” Padme asked anxiously.

“He had a direct hit to his ship when trying to subdue a rebel attack. He nearly spun off into deep space but he had enough sense to steer towards the Command Ship and get himself caught in the gravitational pull from the hanger,” the little droid explained.

“Thank goodness,” Padme breathed, not taking her eyes off his face.

“His mask and helmet detatched during the spinning but fortunately, all of those ships are pressurized,” the droid continued.

“I guess that’s why his head took such a battering,” Padme said softly.

"Oh, he looked much worse when he came in but I wanted to clean him up before you saw him. He was all covered in blood just now," the droid said cheerfully.

Padme stayed by Anakin as the droid carefully stitched the gash across Anakin's forehead. He reset his nose with a crunch that made Padme feel sick and then went on to do some delicate work on Anakin's arm. Padme didn't feel too happy when she saw the arsenal of metal tools the droid brought out to use on the mechanical arm, particularly with all the blood around the wound but finally, the droid stitched up the skin. The surgery had taken hours.

Padme felt exhausted. She was glad she was not a doctor. This sort of thing really was best left to droids.

It was a full day before Anakin came round. By then, he had two magnificent black eyes and with his swollen nose, he barely looked recognizable.

"Padme," he said weakly when he opened his bloodshot eyes.

"I'm here," she said, stroking his arm. "You're very good at injuring yourself," she commented teasingly.

He tried to smile but his face was too sore. "I felt another Jedi, Padme. There is another one. I thought only Yoda was left but there is another one..." he couldn't say any more.

"Don't worry about that now," Padme said. "It will be awhile before you're fit to fight Jedi again."

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Anakin was back on his feet within a few days. He was grateful for his mask. He didn't want his generals staring at his badly damaged face. He knew it would heal fine and even the gash on his face would only leave a hair-line scar eventually but he did not think an injured Dark Lord would impress anybody.

The first thing he did when he returned to his work was send out spies to find out who the young Jedi pilot had been that had destroyed his Death Star. Anakin looked at the lifeless Death Star hanging in space, accusing him of failure. Nearly half of it had been blown away by an absurdly simple attack that Anakin had never thought anyone would be courageous enough to try. Then again, he hadn't planned on there being any new, powerful Jedis in this generation; particularly not trained ones.

He had to find out who his new Jedi was and hunt him down. He needed to kill him now before he got too powerful. He would be vulnerable without other Jedi to work with and while still in the early stages of his training.

He put his best spies into operation and his answer came back to him within days.

"I have the name of the young Rebel Leader, my Lord," one of his spies reported.

"Yes," Vader said impatiently.

"His name is Luke Skywalker."

Vader leaned heavily on the control panel before him, suddenly feeling weak.

"Are you sure?" he said, breathing heavily.

"Yes, my Lord," the spy said.

"Is that all you know?" Vader asked.

"He is nineteen years old and has spent most of his life on Tatooine. His parents are Beru and Owen Lars but he was adopted and his real name is Skywalker," the spy said.

"You may go," Vader said with a wave of his gloved hand.

Anakin's head reeled as he realized the truth. Luke had not died! His son was still alive and he was nearly a man. His heart pounded. It was almost too much to take in. He felt dizzy and he sat down abruptly. For so long, he had thought his son was dead and with Padme unable to have more children, he had accepted that he would never be a father.

Worst of all, Padme had been lying to him all this time. No wonder her mind shields has always been so impervious. He got up abruptly and stalked to their suite.

He stood in the doorway in his mask, looking at her. He was a terrifying sight but his wife had her back to him, reading a report from a war zone in distant system.

He went quickly through to his room and took off his mask. It was unusual for Anakin to come back to their suite and not talk to her immediately, so Padme watched his actions with surprise.

Anakin was back within seconds and Padme saw an expression on his face that she hadn't seen since Mustafar. A feeling of dread filled her. She did not want to know this side of Anakin. She had very bad memories of the last time he had looked like this.

"Why did you lie to me?" he asked through clenched teeth, as she stood up to talk to him.
"Why did you tell me Luke was dead?"

Padme's eyes narrowed slightly. How the hell had he found out? "What makes you think he is still alive?" she asked, her expression carefully blank.

"There is a Luke Skywalker in the Rebel Alliance. It turns out that he is from Tatooine. Do you think that is a coincidence? Or do you think that I am stupid?" he said, his voice shaking with anger.

"How did you find out about this Luke Skywalker?" Padme asked quietly, looking away from him.

"I have my spies, Padme. The Galaxy is thick with them. Do you think I wouldn't find out?" he asked furiously.

Padme was silent, eyeing him cautiously. She was afraid this day would come but she had never quite figured out how to handle it if it did.

"Why did you lie to me?" he demanded again.

Padme looked at him with a mixture of resignation and disbelief. "What did you expect me to do?" she asked calmly.

Red washed over Anakin's vision. All this time, he had not been able to trust her at all. If she was capable of hiding this from him, what else was she hiding? Without even consciously realizing he was doing it, he raised his hand to choke her but before he could lift it more than

half way, Padme had stepped closer to him and back-handed him right across his partially healed face.

He was not expecting her attack and it sent him off-balance. In his heavy armour, he fell against the hologram messaging table behind him and then slid to the floor.

"Enough is enough, Anakin!" Padme said standing over him with clenched fists, her usually mild brown eyes blazing with fury. "If there is any more violence in this marriage, it's going to be from me!" Padme could feel something in her had snapped. It had broken her wide open.

"I've been your prisoner for fifteen years! I forgave you the violence you did to me on Mustafar. I've loved you through every hideous, sick, deranged act you've performed as a Sith during that time. But I will NOT see my son turn into you! There is a chance, a hope for him without you in his life. Do you really want him to be like you? Is that what you want? Do you want him to be a murderer, a power-hungry monster like you? Do you want him to have the kind of marriage where his wife is a prisoner too? Do you want to give Sidious the opportunity recruit Luke? He could finally kill you then! Is that what you want?"

She drew a shaking breath. Padme was like any mother. When her child was threatened, she turned into a lioness. She didn't give a damn what Anakin did to her anymore. It was too late for her life to be returned to her but she would not just lie down and let Anakin ruin her son's life.

"Do you want your son to be a slave like you? Do you think that is something to aspire to — to be a slave to the Dark Side of the Force? Don't you DARE threaten me for protecting my son from you! I did the right thing to keep him from you. Your mind has been so twisted by the Dark Side that you don't even know the difference between right and wrong anymore. Do you think I want that legacy passed on to my son?"

She paused long enough to notice that Anakin's injured face was pale and shocked behind the fading bruising. He looked badly shaken. Padme felt glad. Perhaps if she had been harder on Anakin from earlier on rather than sympathetic and understanding all the time, she could have done more good in his life than she had.

"You can do whatever the hell you want. It's not like you always haven't anyway. But don't you dare accuse me of being wrong or cruel in protecting Luke from you. You know damn well that Darth Vader is no fit man to be a good father," she said and turned on her heel and left for her suite. For the second time in that year, she locked the door between their suites.

Anakin could taste blood in his mouth. He couldn't believe how powerful Padme's backhand had been. She was only a small woman but she would certainly hit hard. He never would have thought Padme had it in her to strike him. He was deeply stunned and dazed.

The pain in his face was overshadowed by the words she had spoken. Had his gentle Padme really said those things? He knew she was tough and smart. He knew she had courage and a strong will but she had really never shown that face to him.

And had he really been going to choke her again? He was deeply humiliated. He had thought he could never do that to her again but his temper had overwhelmed him. It had been such a body blow, finding out about his son. The lie she had told had seemed so unbearably cruel. He had blamed himself all this time. He had thought it was just punishment that they could have no more children. Now he realized she had been protecting Luke from him all along.

Anakin's lips twisted and he winced from the pain of his split lip. He himself had understood for most of the fifteen years that Padme had been with him that he was a slave to his Sith Lord. He had felt ambiguous about it all that time. He knew his desire for power came from his own insecure beginnings in life. Padme was right when she had said that if Sidious had found out about Luke, it was likely that he would have tried to recruit the boy.

Anakin's face tightened. Padme should have trusted that Anakin would protect Luke from Sidious. Then again, if he had found out about the boy's existence before he was five, he would not have hesitated to begin Luke's training in the Dark Side of the Force. He had still believed Sidious was a good man before then and that his aims for the Empire were benevolent.

Anakin sighed and slowly got up. He didn't know what to believe anymore. Was Padme right to be angry or was he? All he knew was that he had missed out on his son's life by believing his wife's lie. He would never regain that time and he was angry about that loss. He had lost so many things in his life and now, he had lost the first nineteen years of his son's life. He knew Padme would say he had no-one to blame but himself. Perhaps she was right.

One thing was for sure, he wanted his son.

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It took Vader a considerable length of time but he finally found out where the Rebels were hiding. They had made their base on a frozen planet called Hoth.

Anakin was not happy these days. Padme had not spoken to him for a long time after their argument over Luke. Even now, she was still frosty and never spoke to him unless she had to. He was not used to being shut out by Padme regardless of their arguments over the years (and there had been many). He missed their relationship and wanted it back desperately but he didn't know how to go about it. He had been badly shocked by her anger and it had made him hesitant to approach her.

He had begun this entire saga with the Dark Side of the Force to save her and the baby. Now it was what was separating them as a family. He didn't know how to change it.

It was, in a sense, fortunate that he was distracted by his invasion of the Rebel Base.

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Vader could not believe that his son had escaped from Hoth. What were the chances of him slipping through all the might of the Empire? It reminded him...

It reminded him of himself as a young man, he thought. It was exactly the sort of exploit that Obi Wan and he would get up to all those years ago. Behind his mask, Anakin almost smiled.

He frowned again when Admiral Piett told him that the Emperor wanted to speak to him.

"What is thy bidding, my master?" he asked, in the formal language he had been taught to use as a Sith apprentice.

"There is a great disturbance in the Force," Sidious said.

"I have felt it," Vader replied. He knew it was pointless to lie.

"We have a new enemy — Luke Skywalker," Sidious said, emphasizing the surname.

"Yes, my master," Vader replied. He had known it would come to this.

"He could destroy us," Sidious continued. Vader was surprised. Did Sidious really believe his son was that powerful?

"He's just a boy. Obi-Wan can no longer help him," Vader countered. He did not want Sidious to believe his son was truly a threat. He knew what the result would be.

"The Force is strong with him. The son of Skywalker must not become a Jedi," Sidious replied, his displeasure evident in his voice. Vader realized that Sidious had known at least as long as he himself had that his son was still alive. Such was the awful bond between them.

"If he could be turned, he would become a powerful ally," Vader said persuasively.

"Yes, yes. He would be a great asset. Can it be done?" Sidious asked.

"He will join us or die, my master," Vader said and wondered if that were true. If Luke didn't join them, could he bring himself to kill his own son? One thing he was sure of, Padme would never have anything to do with him again. Their relationship would be over the minute life left Luke's body. Desperately he clamped the thought and the emotion down. He did not want Sidious to sense it.

It was not long after this that Vader found himself with Princess Leia once more on his hands. This time, she was with a disreputable looking pirate called Han Solo. He didn't have a problem inflicting torture on Han Solo and handing him over to Jabba the Hutt but Leia, as always, was another story. He still had that strange reluctance to hurt her even though she was one of the Empire's biggest threats.

Of course, with Princess Leia and Han Solo in his power all he had to do was sit back and wait for Luke to walk right into his hands.

It didn't take long.

Anakin felt his heart pounding as Luke rose into the carbon freezing chamber via the platform. Finally, after all these years he would see his son face-to-face.

A few hours later, Anakin walked very slowly back to his suite of rooms. He didn't know what to tell Padme, if anything at all. All he knew was that he had failed.

He had failed to either recruit Luke to the Dark Side or kill him — either of which would have pleased his master and either of which would have destroyed his marriage.

He would never forget his first real glimpse of his son. Luke looked so much like himself at the same age that it had made him ache. Even the way he talked reminded Anakin of himself. "You'll find I'm full of surprises," Luke had said. It could have been a nineteen-year-old Anakin speaking.

His potential had been astounding even though the sheer rawness of it had given Vader the obvious upper-hand. Anakin could feel that Luke could easily be the most powerful Jedi he had ever known except perhaps, for himself.

He would never forget the look on Luke's face when he told him that he was his father. His horror and pain had been a mirror held up to Vader's face. He could see the monster he had become reflected clearly in it. Not even his son wanted to acknowledge him — his own flesh and blood. Even when he had put away his light sabre and held out his hand to him, Luke had preferred to jump into empty space than put his hand in his. Like his mother, Luke would prefer a life of hiding and exile than to rule the Galaxy by Vader's side. Luke might look just like his father but his mother shone clear through the boy's soul.

He decided not to tell Padme about his encounter. How the hell would he tell her about cutting off his own son's hand in a duel? Padme would never understand that he had never intended to maim his own son. It was the boy's own inexperience and overconfidence in engaging him in the first place that had led to the injury. Luke still had much to learn of Jedi arts. There was so much that his own father could teach him. But Luke would not put out his hand to his father and so, it was cut off instead. Anakin could feel the pain of this like a wound straight through his chest.

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Padme watched him closely over dinner that rest period. It made him uncomfortable. It was like she knew. After they had finished eating, she leaned forward and looked him in the eye.

"Spit it out," she said bluntly. "What's troubling you? It's obviously something big."

"What makes you think something's worrying me?" he asked cagily. He really didn't want to tell her, particularly as she had only begun speaking to him again in the past few days.

"Anakin, I've lived in close proximity to you for over fifteen years. You've been almost the only person I've spoken to in that time apart from occasional contact with diplomatic visitors or your staff via hologram. I know your moods better than I know my own. I understand your facial expressions better than I understand my own feelings half the time. Why don't you just tell me what happened today?" she said frankly.

Anakin's sky blue eye's examined her face sadly. He decided not to tell her the whole truth. He couldn't bear it if she refused to speak to him again for weeks the way she had after he had found out Luke was still alive.

"I saw Luke today," he said quietly.

He heard her draw in her breath and when he glanced at her face, he saw her eyes were filled with tears. He looked down again and noticed that her hands were shaking.

"Tell me," she said unevenly.

"He looks just like me — like I did at nineteen. Perhaps his hair is a shade lighter from all that sunlight on Tatooine but other than that, he could have been me at the same age," Anakin said, his gaze turned inward.

Padme smiled. She remembered thinking that Luke would turn out exactly like his father and she had been right.

"He's like you, though," Anakin continued introspectively. 'He would rather throw himself down a ventilation shaft into space than rule the Galaxy by my side.' When he glanced up and saw Padme's white face, he hastily added, "his friends rescued him — he's fine."

Padme started crying with relief. "Thank God," she said, covering her face with her shaking hands. "Thank God he wouldn't turn! There is some hope..."

Anakin watched her with mixed emotions. If there was one thing he couldn't stand above all others, it was seeing Padme cry. "Padme! It's a problem that he is like you. Sidious will kill all of us if he doesn't join the Dark Side," he said fervently.

"So be it! I'd rather all of us dead than see my son live the life you've led Anakin. It hasn't made you happy, after all. Why would you wish it on him?" she replied fiercely, clenching her fists.

Anakin looked at her unhappily. "I just want all of us to be together," he said quietly.

Padme shook her head slowly at Anakin. "We would be very unhappy Anakin. The Dark Side is not the way." She got up and went to sit next to him. He put one arm around her and held her close, his lips resting on her hair.

Chapter 17

Sorry this has taken longer to put up than usual but I was reading the new Harry Potter book and who is interested in fan fiction with HP6 just out? Not me — LOL! All I can say having finished the book last night is, thank goodness I now have the Star Wars fandom to play in. I won't bore you with my impressions here, so on with the story...

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

God has called us to be lovers and we frequently think that He meant us to be saviours. So we 'love' as long as we see 'results'. We give of ourselves as long as our investments pay off but if the ones we love do not respond; we tend to despair and blame ourselves and even resent those we pretend to love.

— Rich Mullins

Nearly half a year had passed since Anakin had seen his son. Padme had been subdued for a long time after Anakin's revelations about Luke. He had the feeling that she was expecting him to find Luke again quickly but the boy had seemed to disappear into thin air.

In the meantime, he had his hands full overseeing the construction of a new Death Star far more powerful than the last had been; the Death Star that his own son had destroyed in a daring attack worthy of any Jedi. The project was behind schedule and he knew Sidious would not be pleased. He would have to supervise the project more closely.

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Only a few weeks later, Sidious visited the Death Star for a tour of inspection. Vader had managed to bring the construction back on schedule in that time. Sidious was obviously pleased and said so. Once again, Anakin felt the rush of pleasure in having pleased his master. It was a pleasant change from the severe punishment he had endured after the first Death Star's destruction.

Sidious went on to visit the Command Ship and spent a full day with Vader there, making plans for the next phase of the Death Star and for finally destroying the Rebel Alliance. Vader knew that finding Luke was central to Sidious' plans. They both knew that if Luke was taken out of the Rebel Alliance and turned to the Dark Side, the Alliance would surely fall.

Before he left the Command Ship however, Sidious sent Vader on a spurious errand. He had someone he wanted to visit without his apprentice being present.

Padme glanced up from her work when the main suite door slid open. She hadn't expected to see Anakin back so soon but it wasn't Anakin standing in the doorway.

Padme drew her breath in sharply. "What are you doing here?" she asked angrily as Sidious entered the rooms. "Where is Anakin?"

"Darth Vader is fine. He is running a little errand for me. I wanted some time to speak to you alone without your husband knowing," Sidious said smoothly, hobbling into the room.

Padme was surprised at how much he had aged. If Sidious died soon, Padme realized with a start, then Anakin would be the new Sith Lord. She liked that idea less than Anakin being the Sith apprentice.

"I don't want to speak to you," Padme said decisively and turned her back on the old man and crossed her arms before her.

"Oh but I think you should," Sidious said insinuatingly. "You're still a beautiful woman. You still hold the heart of my apprentice in the palm of your small, pretty hands. I don't think you understand what an influence you have over him."

"I'm his wife, of course I have influence in his life. Not that it's done any good. You've proven the far stronger influence over all these years. I know what Anakin does in the Empire — all the death and destruction and misery he unleashes at your command. I listen to the Galactic news. What good has my influence been?" she asked with a shrug. "I may as well have not been here all this time for all the good I've done," she added bitterly.

"Have you ever said that to him?" Sidious asked curiously.

"No, he doesn't listen to me. Haven't you just heard anything I said?" Padme replied angrily.

"You cause him great inner conflict. Every time he obeys my commands, he thinks of what you would say and how you would feel about it," Sidious said, taking a few steps further into the room.

"So what?" Padme said with another shrug. "He still obeys you regardless."

"He doesn't have a choice about that. Don't you understand the tie between a Sith Master and his apprentice by now?" Sidious asked, watching her carefully.

"He has a choice," Padme contradicted him flatly. Padme turned slightly and looked at Sidious over her shoulder. "Why are you here? What do you want?" she asked bluntly.

"My apprentice hasn't told you the entire truth about your son, Luke," Sidious replied after a pause.

That got Padme's full attention. She whirled around and looked at the Sith Lord with narrowed eyes. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Did Vader tell you what happened when he dueled with his son?" Sidious asked, smiling at Padme's suddenly white face.

"I didn't know that he had fought Luke," Padme said, suddenly quiet and withdrawn. A frown marked her fine brows.

"Yes, a quite spectacular light sabre duel from what I understand. Your husband had a battle of it but he finally forced Luke down a ventilator shaft and out into deep space. After he cut off one of Luke's hands, that is," Sidious said and grinned horribly.

Padme sat down abruptly. "Luke was hurt?" she whispered.

"No, Vader maimed his own son! That is what happened!" Sidious cackled.

Padme was about to drown in a tide of emotions that were too overwhelming to name when a small voice in the back of her mind suddenly made her look piercingly at Sidious.

"Why are you telling me this?" Padme asked with a frown, her brown eyes suspicious.

"You are the boy's mother, you have a right to know," Sidious said.

"I have a right to a lot of things that neither you nor my husband have given a damn about for over fifteen years," Padme said tightly. "I would appreciate it if you would leave now."

"I am always happy to oblige a lady," Sidious said and inclined his hooded head. As he hobbled out of the door, Padme could hear him laughing.

Padme could suddenly vividly picture Sidious when he was a Chancellor. He had been such a gifted speaker, so urbane and convincing. She had trusted him once and he had gone on to destroy her life and Anakin's.

With Sidious gone, Padme was able to give in to her emotions. They broke over her like a tidal wave. Quickly she got up and went to her rooms, closing the door behind her. She did not want to find herself launching herself at Anakin the minute he came through the doorway that rest period. It was a fight she could not win. She just needed some privacy and space to sort through the fury, despair, helplessness and pain on her son's behalf.

Most of all, she needed to acknowledge to herself that Anakin was never going to change. He was forty years old and still on the wrong path that he had set for himself twenty years ago. Nothing she said or did made the slightest bit of difference. She knew that he understood why he had made bad choices and even fully comprehended that his choices were wrong but what use was that knowledge to him when he had never acted on it? Now he had fought and maimed his own son, knowing full well what he was doing. The same son that he had longed for all those years when he thought the boy was dead.

She knew that Sidious had told her about it to upset her. She was also sure that he had a deeper motive than just hurting her with the information. She frowned as she considered what that might be.

Anakin could feel a battery of emotions from Padme as he made his way back to the suite much later than usual. Sidious had left only a few minutes ago and he felt exhausted. He would have so much to get underway the next day but for now, he just wanted to rest.

But he could feel that something was upsetting Padme badly. He could feel anger and an odd kind of helplessness. She was resentful about feeling helpless too. There was grief and resignation there.

When he stepped in their rooms, she was nowhere in sight. This was so unusual that for a moment he panicked, thinking she had finally found a way to escape. Then he noticed her door was shut. With a sinking feeling, he went and took off his mask and armour.

When he came back out he went over to her door. "Padme," he called softly. "Are you alright? I can feel you're upset. Come out and talk to me." He could, of course, just open the door and go in but he tended to respect the few occasions that she wanted some privacy. It allowed them to live together more peacefully.

He frowned at the silence. Then suddenly the door slid open and Padme stood there regarding him expressionlessly. As always, he was struck by how beautiful she was. He never got tired of looking at her even after all these years. There were times when she could still make him catch his breath and this was one of them.

Her hair was out and fell in long curls more than halfway down her back. She was in one of the gorgeous dresses that Anakin supplied for her wardrobe. She was still as slender as she had been as a teenager and the delicate bones of her shoulders that rose above the neckline of her dress made her look far more fragile than she actually was (and Anakin knew all too well that Padme was not fragile).

"I had a visitor this evening," Padme said, stepping across the threshold. Anakin moved aside to let her pass. He badly wanted to kiss her but what she said caught his interest immediately.

"Who would dare intrude on our private rooms?" Anakin said, immediately angry.

"Your Sith Lord," Padme said, an undercurrent of disdain in her reply.

A shaft of fear sliced through Anakin. "Sidious was here?" he asked, almost not able to believe it. His mind ran over the events of the afternoon. He thought the errand to the central power supply for the Ship was specious. "What did he say?" Anakin asked sharply, frowning heavily.

"A lot of poisonous but unfortunately true things," Padme replied. "He said that you had fought Luke and maimed him."

Anakin froze. The very thing that he had not wanted Padme to know was now an open secret between them.

"It's true, isn't it?" Padme said with resignation, her words blunt.

"Yes," Anakin forced out between clenched teeth, leaning against the hologram messaging table with both hands, his shoulders hunched.

Padme looked at him for a long time without saying anything. "I should hate you," she said finally.

"Don't you?" Anakin asked not looking at her, his voice bitter.

"It's what Sidious wants," Padme replied, more gently.

Anakin examined her face carefully but didn't say anything.

"Isn't it?" she persisted.

"I don't know what Sidious wanted in telling you that," Anakin said sullenly.

"Divide and conquer," Padme replied simply.

Anakin frowned at her, not completely understanding.

"You've never studied the art of diplomacy, have you?" Padme said.

Anakin shook his head. "No, I never had the benefits of your education," he said stiffly, still ashamed of it after so long.

"It's really the art of manipulation, you know," Padme said frankly and gave a cynical smile. "Divide and conquer is an old tactic. If you can plant seeds of doubt and suspicion in the minds of individuals then you can effectively manipulate them into self-destructing as a group. Politics is full of it. Why do you suppose there is so much in-fighting and factionalism in any political party?" she asked.

Anakin was looking at her curiously. "Do you think Sidious is trying to make us fight and divide us?" he asked.

"Of course," Padme said with a shrug. "Why else would he tell me anything at all? He is trying to hurt our marriage. It made it much easier for him that he had such a dreadful truth to use."

Anakin looked down. "You're angry," he said, stating it as a fact not a question.

"Of course I am," Padme said bluntly, "he knew I would be. What I don't understand is why he would bother. I obviously don't have any influence over you, nothing like what he has himself. All I can think of is that it has something to do with Luke."

Anakin looked at her sharply again. Two things disturbed him about what Padme said. She obviously had no idea the enormous influence she had over his thoughts and feelings and secondly, he had a feeling that what she said about Luke was absolutely right but he hadn't seen it until just that second.

"He obviously thinks I can influence you on how you deal with Luke," Padme concluded. "Although goodness knows why, I can't influence anything else that you do," she added bitterly.

"You have so much influence over my thoughts and feelings, Padme. I can't describe to you how much who you are influences me," he protested, walking over to her and gently moving a strand of hair away from her face.

"But I can't influence your actions Anakin, so what use is influencing your thinking and emotions?" she replied point-blank.

He frowned and walked away again. Padme had an incredible talent for cutting through to the heart of any matter in any debate (usually to his disadvantage), he thought feeling uneasy.

"Sidious wants you to turn Luke to the Dark Side," Padme stated flatly. "And like everything else that your master has told you to do, you'll do it regardless of how I feel about it. I've seen it happen so many times in the past fifteen years that I lost count a long, long time ago. He obviously expects me to beg and plead with you not to do it but I've finally learned that I'd be wasting my breath. Luke will have to make his own choices. He is out of my reach and I can't influence him. He will have to decide whether to turn Sith or whether to die. One way or the other, I should have known that one day you would destroy him. You destroy everything that you love," she said truthfully.

Anakin looked at Padme as though she had struck him again. "That's not true!" he protested immediately. "I would never kill you and I would never intentionally kill my son!"

"I've been living in a luxurious coffin for over fifteen years Anakin," Padme said with resignation, shaking her head slightly.

"Sidious has succeeded in dividing us," Anakin said shakily.

"Don't blame Sidious for something you did yourself. You did the same thing to Obi Wan, blaming him for the wedge that was driven between us when it was you turning Sith that was really the cause. I know Sidious was trying to use the truth to harm us but he never would have been able to do so if you hadn't handed the perfect weapon to him by injuring our son," Padme said tiredly.

She looked at Anakin's drawn face for few moments. "Sidious has a weakness, you know," she said finally.

Anakin looked at her questioningly. "What?" he asked his gaze suddenly keen.

"He doesn't understand love. He's never loved anyone in his life so he is unable to predict how love will behave. He's stepped into territory he doesn't know trying to interfere in our relationship," Padme said quietly.

Anakin was very still as he listened intently.

"If he had ever loved anyone, he would know that I can't hate you no matter how much I want to. And I want to hate you sometimes Anakin. I want to hate you very badly indeed. Hate is simple, you see. It's straightforward. It doesn't hurt. It isn't vulnerable. It's uncomplicated. It doesn't involve grief or loss. It makes you feel in control. Love is much, much harder," she explained.

Anakin didn't need to be told about the advantages of hate. He knew it all too well. It was fundamental to his power as a Sith. He understood it better than Padme ever would.

"Unfortunately, I can't hate you Anakin. Not even when you make a slave out of me, not even when you maim my child. I can't hate you even when I'm so angry with you that I could scream. When I'm dazed and exhausted from trying to understand why you would do the things that you do — from trying to comprehend your deranged destructiveness, I can't hate you. I still need you even when you can't give me any of the things I really need like freedom and choices and my own life. I can't hate you even though you never change and never fix your mistakes, year after year and decade after decade," Padme said calmly.

She watched the still, powerful figure of her husband. He was a man but he looked as vulnerable as a child right then.

"Sidious doesn't understand that. He can't comprehend it because he's never felt it. He's not capable of feeling it. He expects me to hate you now because that's the only response he can imagine. Sidious thinks he has a complete understanding of the Force but there is one very important part of the Force that Sidious doesn't know and cannot know — the most powerful of it. And that is love," Padme said simply.

With that, Padme carefully lifted the train of her elaborate dress and went back to her rooms.

Chapter 18

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“My luck has turned
Everything lost has come back to me
All the creatures of the night
Have snuck off reluctantly”
— Vik & Linda, The Blue Hour

Anakin watched her go with an almost dazed expression. “Padme!” he suddenly called impulsively.

She stopped and looked back at him over her shoulder but didn’t say anything. He covered the distance between them in a few long strides. He turned her around gently to face him and when Padme looked up into his face, she could see there were tears in his eyes. He said her name softly again and then kissed her deeply, his fingers curled around the nape of her slender neck. Padme leaned into his kiss. She could never resist him when he was like this.

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A long time later, Padme lay next to the warm, heavy body of her husband playing gently with his hair. His head was resting on her shoulder and he was sprawled possessively across her small form. Anakin could almost hear her thinking, so intently was she concentrating on some train of thought.

“I think Sidious thought I would kill you,” Padme said softly, breaking the long contented silence between them.

“Well, that’s not quite what happened,” Anakin said with a smug grin.

“Be serious,” she scolded but he could hear the laughter in her voice. It made him feel happy. It was one of the few things that did. “If I had killed you, it would have left the way clear for him to recruit Luke as his new apprentice,” Padme said reasonably.

She could feel every muscle in Anakin’s body tense the second she said it. She knew that he knew that she was right.

Anakin’s mind was suddenly racing. It was such a devious, cunning, manipulative, creative and subtle plan that it reeked of Sidious’ methods.

“Did you want to kill me?” he asked in a subdued voice.

Padme was silent for a moment. “No,” she admitted, her surprise at herself evident in her voice. “I think, as I said earlier, that Sidious did not and could not factor the effects of love into his plan.”

Anakin relaxed slightly. He believed what she said.

"Isn't it odd?" Padme continued. "He knew that I would be angry but he could not imagine for one second a reaction that was not self-serving. He doesn't understand that love demands that you give way to it, sometimes to the cost of all else that you hold dear," Padme said, more to herself than to Anakin.

A frown crossed his face as she spoke. Her words were to stay with him for a long time.

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Vader carried on with his plans for the Death Star and the Empire generally with great bitterness of heart. He was sure that Padme was right in that Sidious had planned for his wife to kill him in order to leave the way clear for Sidious to get to Luke. Obviously Sidious thought he was unreliable in some way towards his son. He did not trust Vader to turn Luke to the Dark Side of the Force. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. He was angry with his master for doubting him but at the same time, he had doubts about himself too. If it came down to turning his son or killing him, he already knew that he could not kill Luke. So where did that leave him? He had no option but not to fail.

He was not prepared for Sidious' quick return this time and it took him off guard. If he was surprised to see Vader still alive, he gave no sign of it but Vader knew that did not mean anything. Sidious was a master of controlling his emotions in order to give the impression that he wanted to give. He had used it to great effect to gain increasing power in the Senate all those years ago. One thing Sidious made clear was that he expected them to work together to turn Luke. Vader read between the lines; Sidious did not trust him.

It was not long afterward that he felt Luke's presence in a cargo ship going into Endor. He had to tell Sidious, he could not hide his own feelings from him for long. He risked his master's displeasure by visiting him on the Death Star after being told to remain on the Command Ship. He was sure Sidious was trying to keep them apart in order to get to Luke first.

Sidious sent him to Endor to find Luke and bring him back to his master. Vader could sense his master's displeasure. For once, he didn't care.

His son was brought to him in the long shadows of the forests of Endor. He examined him closely once more. He was even more like himself at the same age than he remembered. It made him confused and hesitant. He knew he should take his son to Sidious immediately but he delayed, examining the light sabre his son built with an odd mixture of pride and pain; so much potential about to be destroyed or twisted. Vader's heart was very heavy.

He attempted an explanation, to tell him why he had to take him before the Emperor. His son didn't understand. Nobody but Vader himself understood the terrible pull of his master's bidding.

His son looked at him with the same expression that Padme had so long ago, his words echoing hers eerily. "Then my father is truly dead." How many times had those that he loved told him that he was 'dead'? Was he really a machine now? Were they right?

When he brought him before his master, Vader was silent. His emotions were warring with each other; his old desire to obey and please his master with his love for his son and his son's mother. He looked up sharply when the Emperor told Luke that he could no longer be turned from the Dark Side. Was that true or did the Emperor just say that to discourage Luke from

trying? He had used his master's pull over him many times as an excuse for his actions to Padme but deep down there had always been a small seed of hope that one day, he would get away from it without sacrificing Padme's life.

He examined his son's face as the Emperor spoke and remembered with sudden dreadful clarity, all the lies and half-truths that the Emperor had told him in order to recruit him. He was using the same ones on Luke, trying to whip up the boy's hatred and anger and fear, trying to play on his love for his friends and his desire to help them by attempting to kill the Emperor.

Vader almost couldn't bear seeing his son struggle as he had himself to resist the desire to strike down his enemy in hatred. It was the young Anakin and Count Dooko all over again. He had failed. He had given in to the Emperor's persuasion that revenge was 'natural'.

He was suddenly sure that he wanted his son to resist, succeeding where he had failed. He waited tensely, suffering with his son.

When Luke finally gave in and reached for his weapon, Vader was ready with a counter blow. Even now, Vader could not stand by and let his master be destroyed. The conflict in him was as strong as ever. He could feel tears of despair and frustration at his own confusion momentarily come to his eyes.

His own confusion was weakening him with the Dark Side, he could feel it. It was too easy for Luke to gain the upper hand. Vader was thrown off balance and for the first time since his battle with Obi Wan on Mustafar, he stumbled in a duel. He found himself falling backward down a flight of stairs.

To his amazement, his son did not come after him. Luke sheathed his light sabre with a look of desperate determination.

"Obi Wan had taught you well," Vader said without thinking. He was proud of his son but he knew that he could not back down in front of his master. He climbed back up the stairs and went on the attack.

He tried to ignore the things his son was saying, denying the truth that he knew too well. He was conflicted about fighting his son. He couldn't listen to the part of his heart that his son was touching so painfully, it disconnected him from the Dark Side; the source of his power.

He cleverly trapped his son under the walkway and waited for him to come out. His son refused to fight him any further however. Vader did not know how to deal with this any other way than that of the Dark Side. He used his son's emotions against him. He could fell Luke's love and fear for his friends and...

Vader's heart constricted painfully.

And his sister! Luke had a twin sister, he could feel it.

Vader felt light-headed for a moment as the realization struck. Not only had Padme hidden his son from him all this time but his daughter too!

A true apprentice of Sidious, he used the bait of Luke's sister to tempt him out of his hiding place. "If you will not turn to the Dark Side then perhaps she will," he goaded.

It worked. It worked too well. Vader had not been prepared to face a son who was as strong as himself. With so much conflict weakening his access to the Dark Side, Vader found himself easily being beaten back by his son until finally he found himself on his knees, his sword arm once more sliced off cleanly by a light sabre blade. He was vividly reminded of Mustafar and for a moment, the two experiences blurred in his mind.

He could hear the Emperor cackling with pleasure and a white hot poker of rage forced its way upwards towards his brain. He wanted to kill his master and for the first time, he knew he could really do it.

To Vader's amazement, once more Luke sheathed his light sabre. The boy's confused blue gaze went from his father's missing mechanical hand to his own gloved one. Perhaps he saw the resemblance between them suddenly and didn't like it, Vader thought.

He watched his son do what he himself had never been able to. He threw his weapon away and refused to fight or defend himself. In a moment of clarity, he saw the immense power of his own connection to the Force and Padme's character combined in the son before him. It was a formidable combination. Vader was fascinated.

He did not have long to contemplate this revelation before the Emperor got up in a rage like Vader had never seen. Had Sidious ever failed to recruit a new apprentice, Vader wondered? Judging by his reaction, he had never been thwarted before.

Vader struggled to his feet as the Emperor sent vicious bolts of lightening into his son's body. He moved closer to his master's side. He had undergone this treatment many times himself. He expected Sidious to stop fairly quickly but he didn't. His master was laughing insanely and uttering threats. Vader looked at him anxiously and then back at his son. Luke was obviously becoming spent. He himself had been punished until he was unconscious but he was afraid that Sidious wouldn't stop in time. His son was pleading with him for help. The torturous dissonance inside Vader was becoming intolerable.

The intensity of the lightening increased and suddenly Vader knew that Sidious had every intention of killing his son. In a flash, Vader could hear Padme's words echoing in his memory:

"You have other choices, Anakin."

"When are you going to finally know that no amount of power is worth this?"

"One way or the other, I should have known that one day you would destroy him. You destroy everything that you love."

"Sidious doesn't understand that love demands that you give way to it, sometimes to the cost of all else that you hold dear."

Suddenly it was as though all the pieces of a puzzle that he had been trying to solve all his life finally came together. He finally knew the solution. Without hesitation, he walked over to the Emperor and lifted him bodily into the air. He could feel the Emperor's power weakening from using all the vicious bolts of electricity to kill his son.

When Sidious turned his crippling lightening on himself, Vader no longer cared. If he could destroy the Emperor, then Luke and Padme would be free and so would his daughter

that he had never met. Even if it cost him his own life, it was more than worth it to set them free.

He lifted Sidious into the air and cast him down the bottomless shaft in the room's central core. With a burst of wind, the Emperor's body exploded. Vader staggered and fell. The lightening had affected his life support system once more and he was struggling to breathe.

Luke ran over to him, his young face anxious. "Father!"

"Take me to the Command Ship. My life support is failing," Vader gasped through his mask.

Luke lifted his father in a fireman's hold and hurried to the hanger section. Once Luke sealed the ship, Vader took off his mask in the pressurized environment. He sucked in air quickly and immediately began to feel better.

He noticed Luke was staring at him in fascination. He knew he was astonished at how similar they were even taking into account the age difference.

"We need to get to the Command Ship quickly. My medical droid can fix my life support there," he instructed.

With a quick nod, Luke obeyed and took off from the hanger just as the Rebel Alliance was spreading out through the Death Star to destroy it once and for all. Anakin sank back into his seat, drifting in and out of consciousness.

— — —

Padme spun around as the suite door opened. Anakin had been in an odd mood the last time he left her and had been away much longer than usual. She had an awful feeling of foreboding. She was afraid for Luke.

She frowned when she saw a strange young man come in carrying Anakin without his mask.

"Anakin!" she said fearfully, running over to her husband.

"He needs the medical droid," the young man said.

She nodded and ran through to the medical niche and turned on the droid. The young man carried Anakin to the niche and put him on the bed. "He collapsed on the way from the hanger," the young man said as Padme anxiously waited while the droid gave Anakin oxygen while he worked on his life support.

"His arm!" Padme exclaimed.

How did Luke tell this beautiful woman that he himself had cut it off?

"It will be easy to replace," the droid said as it worked on the life support.

There was quiet as the droid worked and they both watched anxiously.

Luke examined the woman's profile surreptitiously. There was something familiar about her but he couldn't quite put his finger on what it was. He wondered what her relationship was to the frightening man who was his father.

"Excuse me but you look familiar to me," Luke finally said politely, unable to control his curiosity anymore.

The small woman barely glanced at him, her eyes fixed on his father's face. "Do I?" she replied.

"Yes. I wouldn't have seen you before, would I?" he asked.

The woman smiled oddly. "I doubt it. I have been here for over a decade and a half. I've barely seen anyone in that time," she replied, still not looking at him.

"Are you his slave?" Luke asked, repulsed by the idea.

This time the woman's smile was very peculiar. "Yes and no," she said.

"Who are you?" he finally asked, exasperated.

She glanced up at him with a frown finally. "I'm his wife," she said simply.

Luke stared at her. "How long have you been married?" he asked faintly.

"Nearly 23 years," she replied, looking away again.

Luke felt dizzy. He was standing in the same room as his mother and he hadn't known. If she hadn't been so anxious about his father, she probably would have recognized him. Luke suddenly knew why she looked so familiar; it was because she looked like Leia.

"Mother," he whispered, suddenly not able to speak any louder.

The woman stiffened suddenly and she looked up sharply at him. Her large, autumn brown eyes darted over his face, examining every feature.

"Oh my God!" she said, suddenly standing up and covering her mouth with both hands. Tears welled up in her beautiful eyes. Her face crumpled as she stared at him. "You look so much like him, so much like he was back on Naboo! Why didn't I see it immediately?"

The things he reminded her of were obviously painful as well as happy because there was a kind of ache in her expression as she looked at him hungrily. She walked around the bed until she was standing in front of him. "I haven't seen you since you were a year old," she said, her lips trembling as she spoke. "My baby," she whispered. Her small body was trembling. She put out her arms to him and he gathered her against him in a hug.

"Mother," he said, holding onto her. "I missed you so much!"

"I couldn't see you after you turned one. It nearly killed me," Padme said, wiping away her tears as he let her go finally. "But we had to protect you from the Emperor and from..." she looked away to the still unconscious form of her husband. She couldn't finish the sentence. "Obi Wan was watching over you, so I knew you'd be safe but I so wanted to hold you all those years," she said and started crying again.

"Don't cry, mother!" Luke said. "We have all the time in the Universe now," he said happily.

"It's the time that we can't regain that hurts me. I missed out on seeing you grow up," she said sadly.

"Leia remembers you," Luke said encouragingly.

Padme looked at him with wide eyes. "You know about your sister?" she asked.

"I met her in the Rebel Alliance," Luke said. "I didn't know she was my sister at first but Ben, I mean, Obi Wan told me. He started my training, you know," Luke said proudly.

"I miss Obi Wan," Padme said sadly, looking away for a moment.

"I can still see him," Luke said comfortingly.

"Say 'hi' and 'thank you' for me next time, will you?" Padme asked with a sad smile.

"I'm hoping to still see Yoda too," Luke said.

"Yoda? Is he dead?" Padme asked with a small gasp.

"Yes, he died only a short time ago. Didn't you know?" Luke said kindly.

"No, I didn't," Padme said, the tears coming back. "I so wanted to see him again one day. I miss him too."

"He wouldn't want you to be sad," Luke said.

"No, I know," Padme said. "It's just that... so many people that I knew and loved have gone now."

"You have me and Leia and father," Luke said comfortingly.

Padme smiled at him. "You remind me so much of Anakin when he was your age," she said softly.

Suddenly on the bed, Anakin opened his eyes. "Padme," he said weakly.

She was beside him in a flash. "I'm here Anakin," she said, looking down into his face and stroking back his hair.

He breathed a sigh of relief.

"Luke is here still too," she said beckoning to Luke.

Anakin looked at his son, his anxiety leaving him. "I couldn't do it Padme," he said, looking back at her. "Sidious was going to kill him because he wouldn't turn and I just... I just couldn't let him do it..."

"He risked his life to kill Sidious and save me," Luke told his mother solemnly.

"Sidious is dead?" Padme asked faintly.

"Dead and gone forever," Luke said.

"And my Anakin has come back to me," Padme said, leaning over and looking into her husband's eyes lovingly.

Chapter 19

Okay, I promise I will put ‘The End’ at the end of the final installment so that my kind readers won’t waste energy stressing over whether or not there is another chapter — LOL! I have tried to tie up all the loose ends that I can in the final chapters.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“So much is happening to me, so much that I can’t even see.

So many words of wisdom that I am trying to be.

Catch me if I should fall and even more so while I’m standing tall.

My head is spinning around and it’s making me dizzy, I’m spinning around and it’s making me ill.

You don’t understand what I’m going through just to find a way to climb.”

— Delta Goodrem, In My Own Time

While Anakin was undergoing surgery, Luke used the communications system in the suite to contact Leia and Han. He logged in the code to connect with Han’s ship’s communications.

“Are you still alive, buddy?” he asked cheerfully, grinning from ear to ear.

There was a surprised silence at the other end. “Hey Luke!” finally came Han’s ironic voice. “We were wondering the same thing about you.”

“Alive and well,” Luke replied. ‘You’ve done a good job on the Death Star,’ Luke said with amusement. “It looks spectacular from here.”

“We didn’t want to leave without you, Luke. Where are you now?” Han asked.

“I’m on the Command Ship,” Luke said. “The Emperor is dead.”

“You killed the Emperor?” Han asked with a mixture of glee and disbelief.

“No, Darth Vader killed him,” Luke replied.

There was another silence. “Luke buddy, have you been taking anything you shouldn’t?” Han joked.

“It’s true. Leia will explain to you. Vader killed the Emperor to save me,” Luke said.

“He’s lost his mind,” Han said, obviously to Leia who was close by.

“Luke, I want you to bring Father to us on Endor as soon as you can,” Leia said. “Okay?”

“He’s having surgery at the moment Leia, so it probably won’t be until tomorrow,” Luke replied.

“Is he going to be alright?” Leia asked, her voice tinged with anxiety.

"Hey, what do you care if Vader is going to be alright?" Han protested.

"I'll explain later," Leia said with a touch of impatience.

"And I thought Bail was your father anyway," Han continued.

Luke smiled to himself.

"Shut up Han, I'm talking to Luke," Leia replied with more than a touch of impatience this time.

"Alright, alright!" Han muttered.

"Will you bring him? We'll be in the Ewok village. I'll send you the co-ordinates," Leia said to Luke.

"Of course, I will," Luke said with a smile in his voice. "I'll bring mother too."

He heard Leia's sharp intake of breath. "Mother? Is she still alive?" Leia asked in an odd, subdued voice.

"Yes Leia, she is. She's been with father all this time. He kept her here and she couldn't get away to see us," Luke explained.

Leia was silent at this piece of information.

"Look, we'll talk about tomorrow on Endor okay?" Luke said.

"It's a date," Leia said but her voice still sounded odd.

— — —

Vader was in surgery for hours and meanwhile, Luke and his mother caught up on over twenty lost years. Padme drank in Luke's story from the time he was a little boy on Tatooine until his final battle with his father.

Padme's heart beat quickly while Luke described Vader's final confrontation with his master. She realized with a shock how close it had been to Luke dying. When Luke described how his father had destroyed Sidious rather than allow him to die, the look on his mother's face nearly broke his heart. It was like someone she had thought dead had come back to life long after she had given up hope.

"I'm so proud of you," Padme whispered to him through her tears. "You have something your father didn't to allow you to resist the Dark Side like that."

"What, mother?" Luke asked curiously.

Padme frowned as she thought. "Wholeness, perhaps. A strong and unapologetic sense of identity and an innocence that no slave boy could ever have, no matter how strong his will or pure his heart," she said slowly and pensively.

"Dad was a slave?" Luke asked with wide eyes.

"Until he was ten, he then became Obi Wan's Padawan," Padme explained.

"No wonder he found it so hard to resist power," Luke said, his blue eyes far away. The same blue eyes as his father's, Padme thought with a queer ache in her chest.

She was astonished at how quickly Luke penetrated his father's character, and understood where his temptations and weaknesses had lain. It had taken her far longer to understand.

"When did you fall in love with father?" Luke asked eagerly. He wanted to know all about them for their story was his too and he had been denied it up until now.

"When he was still Obi Wan's Padawan," Padme said with a smile at her son.

"I thought the Jedi couldn't marry," Luke said with a slight frown.

"They weren't supposed to. We broke the rules and I'm afraid we paid for it, in a lot of ways," Padme said, her gaze turned inward for a moment.

"But you never regretted it, did you?" Luke asked.

Padme looked at her son steadily. "There have been plenty of times I've regretted loving your father but I never stopped loving him, no matter how evil the things were that he did," she confessed.

Luke was satisfied with the answer. "I'm so glad I've finally found you both. I've thought of you both so often on Tatooine. I needed you," he said softly, the expression in his blue eyes breaking his mother's heart.

"I needed you too," Padme admitted, her brown eyes filling with tears.

"Don't cry, mother. We're together now and we'll be happy," Luke said confidently.

Padme smiled at the innocent enthusiasm of her son. He was still a boy in so many ways. She glanced toward the medical niche where Anakin was still being operated on. She hoped that Luke was right and she did believe that the real Anakin had finally shown himself again after so long but... she had learned to doubt in the past twenty years.

— — —

Padme made up the bed in Anakin's suite for her son. He was obviously exhausted and needed to sleep. He had been too fascinated by his parent's story to settle down but after the first torrent of his questions was answered, he was struggling to keep his eyes open. He washed himself in his father's bathroom and put on some of the trousers and tunics that Anakin kept for when he wasn't wearing his armour. They were rather big on the boy, his father was a powerfully built man but it seemed to mean a lot to Luke to wear his father's clothes. It made him happy.

Padme sat next to him until he fell asleep, thinking of all the lost years when she had wanted to do just this. She almost couldn't take her eyes off him, afraid that he would disappear again if she turned away for an instant.

She was anxious about Anakin however and went back to the medical niche. To her relief, the worst of the operation was over. The droid was making final adjustments to the new mechanical arm he had fitted.

"The new skin tissue will need to be grown to size," the droid said to Padme as she came in. "But he should be back to normal within three months at the most."

"Good," Padme said gratefully. "Just as long as he won't be in pain."

"Nothing unmanageable," the droid reassured her.

"I need to operate on you next," the droid said, still making adjustments and testing the reflexes of each finger.

"On me?" Padme said with a slight frown.

"Your husband ordered me to take out the slave device in your neck," the droid said. 'It won't take long and I won't need to give you general anaesthetic,' he said comfortingly. "It will only need a few stitches."

Padme sat down very slowly next to the still unconscious Anakin. She looked at his peaceful face. Had he realized that she could quite easily make a run for it while he was still unconscious? Maybe he had known that she would not leave her son now that she had found him. If he had guessed this, he had been right. Would she have left if Luke had not been here, she asked herself seriously? She honestly didn't know the answer. The desire to find her son and daughter, and her love for Anakin would have pulled her apart trying to make that decision. She was glad that Anakin had chosen his moment wisely. She wondered what he foresaw for their future for him to now make the decision to free her. She couldn't fathom it.

"Perhaps its time to take his old slave device out too while he's still unconscious," Padme said to the droid.

"Yes, Mrs Skywalker," the droid said cheerfully.

— — —

Many hours later, Anakin woke up with a new mechanical arm and sore all over. Once more, he had burns all over his skin and once more he sought assurance from the droid that they would not leave scars. He was relieved to be told that they would not. His life support was working perfectly again but he had one last order for the droid.

"I want you to make me a new mask but a transperant one," he ordered.

"Yes, Lord Vader," the droid said.

"Lord Vader is no more. You can call me Anakin," he replied. "Did you take the device out of my wife's neck?" he asked.

"Yes, master Anakin," the droid said obediently.

Anakin got up and went in search of Padme, hoping against hope that she hadn't run from him and taken his son with her. He was relieved to the point of feeling weak in the knees when he found her asleep in her bed. He was covered in burn cream and antiseptic powder so he didn't lie down next to her. He sat beside her bed and watched her sleep.

As he sat there he pondered his last few minutes as Darth Sidious' apprentice. He had followed the grand Sith tradition of killing his master, he thought with a wry and humourless smile. In the end though, there had been no choice between his master and his son. He would rather be dead himself than see Sidious kill his son and then spend the rest of his life having to be a slave to the creature who had murdered Luke. It was impossible to contemplate that life. Not only would he have hated serving his son's murderer but it would have been the last nail in the coffin of his marriage. His eyes traveled over the soft, beautiful curves of his wife's sleeping face. He would not have Padme hate him for sacrificing his son to the Dark Side

even if he could have borne the horror of it himself. The strange compulsion that had forced him to not only obey his master regardless of his own feelings but also defend him against Luke's attack had lost its hold over him when he saw Luke dying. Love had overcome the Dark Side of the Force at long last.

— — —

Luke found his parents in Padme's room a short time later. His mother was still asleep.

"Hey Dad, your clothes are cool. Are they proper Jedi uniforms?" he asked sleepily, his hair all mussed like a little boy.

Being called 'Dad' caught Anakin by surprise and he was even more stunned at the shaft of emotion that went through him to hear the words from a young man who looked so much like his younger self.

He smiled. "Yes, my son. You are wearing a Jedi Knight's traditional clothing," he said.

"Brilliant!" Luke said, obviously impressed.

Padme opened her eyes to see her son and her husband smiling at each other. She wondered if she was still dreaming. She had never expected to see this scene in her lifetime but she had seen it many times in her dreams. She lifted one hand and brushed a tear away.

Anakin turned back to face her as soon as he realized she was awake. His eyes examined her face anxiously. She put out one hand and ran her fingers comfortingly through his hair, carefully dodging the small line of stitches at the back of his neck. He relaxed immediately, the familiar gesture reassuring him. He frowned suddenly and placed his good hand on the back of his neck tentatively.

"What happened?" he asked her.

"They removed yours too," she said cryptically. It was a secret that should be kept between just them, she knew.

They exchanged a look that Luke could not interpret but he had the feeling they would be kissing if he wasn't present. "Are we going to Endor today?" Luke asked hopefully.

"Yes darling," Padme said. "Are you up to it, Anakin?" she asked, turning her eyes to her husband's face. Luke beamed at his mother's term of affection.

"If the droid finishes my new mask then yes," he replied with a nod.

— — —

It felt strange to Padme to finally cross the threshold of her prison only a few hours later. She didn't want to make a big deal of it so she quickly strode over it without hesitation. She found she couldn't help staring at everything. It felt surreal to be in a different environment after so long — even just a passageway.

She was still unused to seeing Anakin with a transparent mask. She was used to seeing him in his Jedi clothes as he wore them in their suite during his rest periods but the mask was new.

Luke was as excited as a young pup. Only his father knew that Leia had been with the Rebel Alliance on Endor. It was the only reason that he had agreed to meet with them. His

mother had no idea that she was about to see her daughter again so soon.

They took a transport to Endor, leaving Admiral Piett in charge. No-one on the Ship apart from them knew that Sidious was dead. They would keep the secret as long as necessary to re-establish a new order, Anakin had decided. Padme, for the first time in a long time, had agreed with him.

As they landed in a dense part of the forest, a small party came through the woods to meet them. Leading the party was a very beautiful, slender young woman with autumn brown eyes and glossy brown hair. Padme could tell immediately that she had been used to leadership from a very young age. She felt an instant kinship with and attraction to her.

Luke bounded out of the ship first and went up to the young woman and hugged her. He then shook hands with a slightly older, fair-haired man and they clapped each other on the back. A wookie was also there and grabbed Luke into a bear hug that he looked like he wouldn't escape from.

It did Padme's heart good to see the friends her son had. She knew he would engender loyalty and friendship wherever he went.

The small group of Ewoks with the trio cheered to see Luke again.

"Han, Chewie — I want you to meet my father. Leia, I believe you've met Dad before," Luke said nervously.

Padme's head reeled. Was this beautiful young woman her daughter? "Leia," she whispered, her eyes full.

"You don't look like Darth Vader," Leia said to her father, her gaze unfriendly.

"Darth Vader is gone," Anakin said tiredly. He knew this was going to be difficult but it had to be done.

Leia looked like she was going to say more but she was arrested by the sight of the small, beautiful woman standing next to her father. She frowned slightly and then her face cleared. "Mother!" she breathed, her face lighting up. "It is you! I remember you. You look just like I remember," she said rather incoherently.

Tears welled up in Padme's eyes yet again and she ran towards her daughter. She couldn't bear not to hold Leia for another second. The two women embraced while the others watched with full hearts. Leia was taller than her mother and had some of Anakin's features but generally, they looked very much alike. Leia pulled away first and examined her mother's face. "I remember you!" she said again softly. Padme was unable to speak. She only nodded.

Meanwhile, Anakin was examining his own impressions. He should have known this woman was his daughter. There was a reason why she had reminded him so strongly of a teen-aged Padme. There had been a reason why the Force had put a check in his emotions about harming her. And also, he had felt something he had not been able to identify because it was so improbable — the girl had Jedi powers as strong as her brother, they were just completely undeveloped.

It made his heart ache to see just how much like her mother she was. He regretted the harm he had done her. He could apologise but it wouldn't change the past. It was up to Leia

whether she chose to forgive him and have a real relationship with him. He suspected that his past actions would always be a barrier between them. It was hard to forgive and forget torture, regardless of how comparatively mild it had been compared with what he had done to Han Solo.

He turned his blue gaze on the pirate and found he was staring at him with a look of undisguised dislike. Anakin didn't give a damn about Han Solo's feelings about anything, least of all himself but it would make it difficult because of the strong attachment between his children and this friend of theirs.

"Come and have some dinner," Leia invited, after she and Padme had dried their tears. They still stood hand in hand. "The Ewoks have prepared a celebration feast."

The party moved off into the darkening forest.

Chapter 20

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Oh, my life is changing everyday, in every possible way.
And oh, my dreams, it’s never quiet as it seems.
I know I’ve felt like this before but now I’m feeling it even more,
Because it came from you.
And then I open up and see the person falling here is me, a different way to be.

And now I tell you openly, you have my heart so don’t hurt me.
You’re what I couldn’t find. A totally amazing mind, so understanding and so kind;
You’re everything to me.”

— Cranberries, Dreams

Anakin sat around the fire with the others and watched the feast. Han and Luke were sharing stories of the final battle that had destroyed the Death Stars and the Emperor. Padme and Leia were catching up on over fifteen years of history. The Ewoks were eating and dancing to their music.

He had not seriously thought of what the next step was now that Sidious was gone and he was no longer his slave. One thing was for sure, he had no intention of being a Sith Master. He would not take on an apprentice. The Sith knowledge of the Dark Side of the Force would die with him one day.

He got up and slipped away into the dark shadows of the night forest. He couldn’t eat with his mask on anyway so it was just as well that he wasn’t hungry. He paced the walkways of the Ewok village lit with just flaming torches as he contemplated his future.

In the half shadows he saw something shining. He frowned and peered into the gloom. To his amazement, he could see Obi Wan and Yoda shimmering like light on water in the murkiness. They were smiling at him, pleased.

“I felt your death, Master Yoda,” Anakin said sadly. The ripple in the Force at Yoda’s passing had been a considerable one.

“To reestablish the Jedi Order, time it is,” Yoda said sagely, nodding his small head. “The running of the Galaxy, leave safely with Padme you can.”

“Yes Anakin, it’s more important for you to pass your Jedi knowledge onto Leia and Luke, and eventually their children too. Leave the politics to the politicians,” Obi Wan advised.

Tears came to Anakin’s eyes. “I’m so sorry I failed you,” he said, his voice wavering slightly. He felt heartbroken at his failures, seeing his old masters now. His treachery and betrayal sat heavily on his heart.

“Fulfilled the prophecy, you did,” Yoda said. “Back into balance, you have bought the Force. By killing Sidious, the Sith are no more.”

Anakin looked at them both suddenly feeling light-headed and odd. Yoda was right! In a way that he had never imagined, he had fulfilled the prophecy after all. Perhaps he never would have been able to destroy the Sith Master without becoming a Sith himself. Who knew? The Force had used his weaknesses to its own purpose, after all.

"I don't know if I can re-establish the Jedi to be as strong as they once were. I'm not you, Yoda. I've never picked and trained Younglings. I've never even had a Padawan," Anakin said with unusual self-doubt.

"Doubts you have," Yoda observed approvingly. "Good this is. More open to the leading of the Force it will make you. Arrogance your problem always was. Perhaps gone it now is."

"We will help you, Anakin," Obi Wan said readily.

Anakin felt better. For all that Obi Wan had never understood him, he still had the ability to make Anakin believe that everything would work out in the end.

"Anytime you need us, we will be there," Obi Wan reassured.

"How will I know who to choose for the Youngling School?" Anakin asked. "Sidious said the new crop of Younglings was weak. So far, only Luke and Leia have come to light in his generation. Is it likely those of Youngling age would be any better than Luke's generation?"

"Plenty of talent there was even in Luke's generation. Carefully hid, these children were. Hunted by Sidious and Vader, their parents knew they would be. Protected by the Force too, they were," Yoda explained seriously.

"How do I find them?" Anakin asked.

"Guide you, the Force will," Yoda said simply.

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By the time Anakin wondered back to the party, the fire was burning low. Leia and Padme were sitting by each other looking very peaceful, watching the embers. Luke had joined them. Han had disappeared, probably to bed.

Padme watched him as he approached her face difficult to read. "Are you ready to go back to the Command Ship now?" she asked quietly as he joined her.

"Yes, I think we both need some rest after the events of the past couple of days," he said. "We will come back tomorrow or Luke and Leia and their friends can join us on the Command Ship for a few days. There are plans I want to discuss with them."

Luke and Leia exchanged a glance. "I'll come if Han is invited," Leia said with a touch of defiance.

"If Han wants to come, he is welcome," Anakin said mildly. He was still not enamoured of the idea of his children being friends with a pirate but he knew that Han had saved their lives on more than one occasion. Anakin had reason to be grateful to him.

"I'll come, father. I think we might spend the rest of the night on Endor and say good-bye to the Ewoks and then join you early in the day tomorrow," Luke said, glancing at Leia for her agreement. Leia nodded but said nothing.

Luke and Leia waved their parents off as they got into their small transport and took off. "I need to learn how to fly again," Padme sighed. "I've lost a lot of my confidence. It's a good thing I did so much work in the simulators over the years. At least I've kept up with the technology."

"Did Luke and Leia tell you their stories?" Anakin asked, directing the transport towards the Command Ship.

"Yes and they will tell you too when they get the chance. They are both amazing people, I'm so proud of them. You were gone a long time," Padme added, looking at him questioningly. "Are you alright?"

"I saw Yoda and Obi Wan," Anakin said softly.

Tears came to Padme's eyes. "What did they say?" she asked quietly.

"They said I was to concentrate now on reestablishing the Jedi Order and you were to take over the running of the Empire," he replied, his thoughts still far away with Yoda and Obi Wan.

"I wouldn't run the Empire," Padme said flatly. "I'd abolish it and re-establish the democracy we used to have."

"I know," Anakin said. "That's what they wanted."

"What do you want?" Padme asked him with a keen look.

"More than anything else, I want to reestablish the Jedi Order. I don't want to be bothered with the Empire or politics anymore. I've had enough," he said simply.

In her seat next to him, Padme smiled and relaxed. She felt more peaceful than she had in over two decades. Anakin felt it and was content.

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The next morning over breakfast and before their children arrived, Anakin looked at Padme and said, "Leia is still angry with me, isn't she?"

"Do you blame her?" Padme replied flatly.

"No but it will be hard to work with her if she holds on to her resentment," Anakin acknowledged.

"You'll have to put up with it until you can undo the damage," Padme said matter-of-factly.

"She rubs me up the wrong way," Anakin complained sulkily.

"That's because she's very much like you," Padme said bluntly.

Anakin gave her a very unimpressed look. "It's true," Padme said blithely.

"Luke is just like you," Anakin said, his gaze turned inward remembering their final duel. 'When he put away his weapon and refused to fight, I was reminded so strongly of you.' He was silent for a few moments. "It made me think of all the things you had said to me over the years about choices and power and love," he said finally.

Tears came to Padme's eyes. Had anything she said made an impression after all? Had it saved Luke's life in the end? Who knew?

"You saved Luke because you love him," Padme said gently, touching his arm across the table.

"I saved Luke because I suddenly realized that the only way to be free was to sacrifice my own life for those that I loved. Killing Sidious would set not only Luke free and his sister but you too. I felt there was no hope left for my life after all the bad choices I had made but Luke had a chance — and Leia and you," he said. "I was amazed to wake up in my medical niche," he said with the ghost of a smile.

Padme looked at him carefully. "Were you glad to wake up?" she asked softly.

"Once I realized you hadn't run away, yes," he replied honestly.

"I knew my Anakin was still there somewhere," she said, her brown eyes caressing his face. "What a Jedi Knight you've become," she added with a smile.

"I took the longest road possible," Anakin said wryly, "And the hardest way to learn my lessons."

"I don't think it ever would have been an easy road for you, Anakin. Not with the start in life that you had," Padme said seriously.

"I can't blame my actions and bad choices on that forever," Anakin said, his lips thinning.

"You didn't. You started to make right choices," Padme said reassuringly.

"Finally," Anakin said, almost scornfully.

"Finally," Padme agreed with a smile.

Luke, Leia, Han and Chewbacca arrived on the Command Ship just before lunchtime. "Huh, nice place the Emperor had here," Han commented as they were led to the old throne room. Anakin had moved a table in there where the throne had once been.

Padme had hugged each of the visitors enthusiastically before they all sat down. Luke had run over to his father and done the same. Leia, Han and Chewie simply watched Anakin with suspicion. He looked very different in his Jedi uniform and transparent mask. They did not feel like they were holding an audience with Darth Vader but they were all wary just the same.

Luke sat on one side of his father. Padme was on his other side and Leia sat next to her. Han and Chewie sat next to each other on Luke's other side.

"I want to discuss our plans for the Empire with all of you. I will need the help of everyone at this table," Anakin began.

Han and Leia exchanged glances but said nothing. Luke nodded seriously and for a moment, Padme saw the Jedi in her son.

"I am withdrawing from political life and handing the Empire over to Padme. She will reestablish the democracy that was in place before Palpatine overturned the Senate," Anakin said.

"With your help," Han said sarcastically.

"With my help," Anakin acceded. He wasn't going to start a fight over something that stupid. Besides, it was only the truth.

"Leia, I would like you to help Padme with this task. I understand you have the very best diplomatic training," Anakin said.

"I learned from the very best teacher," Leia said, smiling at her mother. She knew that her mother had written the training units that she had completed so young.

Anakin intercepted the look. "I don't understand," he said with a frown.

"I wrote the diplomatic training units that Leia completed. I also wrote all the military training units that the Rebel Alliance were using to train their soldiers and spies," Padme finally told Anakin. "I wrote the units before... before you brought me here all those years ago." She hesitated to say, 'before you re-captured me'. There were some things her children did not need to know.

Suddenly Anakin understood why the Rebel Alliance had always been so sophisticated. All the time that Padme had been shut in their suite of rooms, she had effectively been working against him and the Empire. It was not surprising that the Alliance had grown sophisticated and skilled enough to make those attacks on the Death Stars. He realized that in the end, Padme had prevailed in a sense. Her spirit shining through his son had made him decide to kill Sidious and her knowledge had trained his enemies while she herself was within his power.

There were times that he acknowledged that he could know Padme his whole life and still never fully comprehend everything that she was.

"That explains a great deal," was all Anakin said. Padme smiled to herself.

"In the meantime, I would like Luke to join me in reestablishing the Jedi Order," Anakin continued.

Luke's eyes widened. He could think of nothing he would like better.

"Geez Luke, more delusions of grandeur," Han said, rolling his eyes but grinning at his buddy.

Luke grinned back.

"I would like you both to act as protectors for my wife and Leia," Anakin said to Han and Chewie. "The pay will be very good," he added.

"Hey, I would expect it," Han said. "Don't think I don't know that keeping these two women safe would not be an easy job," he added.

Leia smiled at Han and he grinned back.

"I will need to train you in the Jedi Arts, Leia," her father said quietly. "The Galaxy needs all the talented Jedi it can get. You and your brother will easily be the most powerful Jedi of your generation."

"Hey, I'm not being bodyguard to a Jedi!" Han protested. "If I do something she doesn't like, I'm not arguing at the end of a light sabre."

"You should be used to doing a lot of things I don't like by now, Han," Leia replied sarcastically with a sickly sweet smile.

"Oh you love it, baby. You know you do," he teased with an easy grin.

"Enough of that!" Anakin said. He did not want to see his beautiful daughter flirting with a pirate right under his nose. "We have serious plans to make."

Padme tried to hide a smile.

"I will also need to complete your training Luke. I know Yoda said you were a fully fledged Jedi now but there are things that Obi Wan did not get the opportunity to show you," Anakin continued.

Luke nodded earnestly. He knew there was more and he was hungry for it as his father had once been.

"I will need to spend a great deal of time with your mother and Leia over the next few weeks informing both of them of where things stand in the Empire at present but after that, you and I will need to be visiting many systems looking for Younglings to train as well as some talented adults of your generation that may still be worth training," Anakin said to his son. "It will be difficult as there are only two of us to train them. Leia may be able to join us by having a Padawan herself one day if she so wishes but at present, her energies will be taken up with her own training and helping her mother dismantle the Empire and set up a new Senate."

This time when Leia and Han exchanged looks, the suspicion in their expression had turned to satisfaction. They now knew that the Rebel Alliance could take its place in helping establish a new democracy.

"What are we going to tell the Emperor's men?" Padme asked the group. "They know Darth Sidious is dead. Do we let them believe Darth Vader is dead too?"

"I fear that we may lose control of the Empire's resources if they believe Darth Vader is dead too," Anakin said. "It will bring enemies from every corner of the Galaxy at a time when we need peace to establish the new democracy."

"I agree, father," Luke said gravely.

"I can see what you mean," Leia said with a nod.

"Perhaps Darth Vader needs to live on until the new Senate is well established. Then the hand over of the Empire's resources to the Senate will be much smoother when it happens," Padme said in agreement. She had no desire for more war if ambitious systems felt there was no central power in the Galaxy. "You will have to continue to play the part of the new Sith Lord," Padme said to Anakin.

"If you are handling the day-to-day administration of the transference of powers from the Empire to the Senate then I can be absent supposedly on 'Empire business' when I am really rebuilding the might of the Jedi. We will need a strong Jedi Council once the new Senate is in place. There will be those who will try and take advantage of the transitional period to attempt to take control," Anakin replied. "If so, they will be less likely to attempt it if they believe a Sith Lord is still behind it all."

"How long will all this take and when will Darth Vader finally fade from the Galaxy?" Leia asked.

Padme and Anakin exchanged looks. "It will take longer than any of us like but it's achievable within our lifetime," Anakin replied.

"Because of the amount of diplomacy involved and the setting up of new legislation — both transitional and once the new Senate is in place, I predict it will take at least five to ten years," Padme said frankly.

"But even once the new Senate is in place, it will be vulnerable particularly with only a young Jedi Order to protect it," Anakin said seriously. "As for Darth Vader, we'll have to kill him off at some point when the Senate is still very young. A simple rumour that he was killed in some far flung corner of the Galaxy by one of the new Jedi will take care of his legacy," he added without regret.

Epilogue Part I

The epilogue got so ridiculously long that I had to split it in two — I hate loose ends! Here is Part I.

EPILOGUE — Part I

I lied, I stole in the name of fear but I won't be silent here
I don't want somewhere to run to, I don't want somebody I can shake
Lord I want my dignity again, before I walk on fire
You gotta look me in the face
I won't flinch and I won't turn away
I'm sorry for being scared but I won't drop you there
Oh darling, let me show you I love you
Oh world, let me show you I care
Give me back my touch, give me back my feeling
Give me everything. I wanna be your witness
I want you to believe in me

— Before I Walk on Fire, Sophie B Hawkins

The next few weeks after their initial meeting were stressful for Padme, not because she didn't have a clear vision for the new Senate but because she found out that all of her former contacts and allies from the old Senate were dead. She should have expected it. There was every reason for Sidious to have ensured that none of them survived. Of course, a great many of the deaths looked 'accidental' but once the pretense of the Imperial Senate had fallen, the Emperor was quite open about murdering any dissidents.

She realized that if she had thought she had a great deal to forgive Anakin for over the past twenty years, there would be far more to forgive now she had access to the full knowledge of what had happened under the Empire. Before this, Anakin had carefully hidden the most important information from her knowing what her reaction would have been. There were days when she had to constantly bite her tongue to stop herself from haranguing him. There was no point. Yelling at him would not bring her old friends and allies back, and she had to focus on moving forward.

Anakin was quite well aware of her feelings, however. As always, he could feel the emotion that she did not show. He knew that this change in his life would be hard but the living of it each day was wearing him out emotionally. He had to deal with Padme's displeasure at all that had happened for nearly two decades, Leia's suspicion of him and

coolness towards him, and the expectations of Yoda and Obi Wan. He was not even forty-five yet and there were days when he felt like an old man.

His real pleasure at that time came from seeing Luke continue to develop as a Jedi. Within a few months, he was almost ready to take on a Padawan.

"How about your sister as a Padawan?" Anakin had asked him one day as they set off on a mission to another system. The Force had alerted them both to a young teenager with a powerful connection to the Force in this particular system. They were setting off to find him or her.

"No way!" Luke had said with a laugh. "Are you crazy? Can you see Leia submitting to the discipline of any master? She won't even listen to you half the time and she knows how much you can teach her."

"She reminds me of me," Anakin said wryly to his son.

"Of course she does. She's your daughter!" Luke said with a grin and pulled on his helmet.

The mission proved successful and they brought back a young man barely in his thirteenth year from the Breyanan system. He had exceptional talents. His name was Moe and he was very handsome with dark curling hair and startlingly deep blue eyes. Luke had felt a kinship to the young orphan immediately and would take him on as a Padawan once Anakin had taken him through an accelerated Youngling program over the next few years.

In the meantime, Anakin was overseeing the rebuilding of the Jedi Temple.

Leia was trying to develop her Jedi skills as well as help her mother set up the new Senate. It was difficult to meet the demands of both, particularly as she had to submit to the authority of a father that she resented still. They had never discussed the torture she had undergone while she was a Rebel leader. One day after a difficult session with light sabers, they were both totally frustrated with each other. Anakin knew he had to apologize if they were ever to move forward.

"I never would have hurt you if I'd known who you were, you know that," Anakin had said to her truthfully, sheathing his light sabre.

"No, you just would have tried to turn me into a Sith the way you did Luke," Leia had replied angrily.

"Would I have succeeded?" Anakin asked skeptically with an underlying weariness.

"I would rather have died!" Leia cried.

Anakin looked at her with a tired expression. "You are so much like your mother. Both you and Luke have her character," Anakin said quietly. "I'm so proud of you both."

Tears came suddenly to Leia's eyes. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, she needed her father. Bail had been a good father to her but blood was thicker than water after all and she found she desperately wanted his approval despite everything.

"Everyone says that I'm like you," Leia said, roughly wiping her eyes with her hand.

"You're hotheaded and passionate like me," Anakin replied. "But you have your mother's strength of character and idealism."

"I needed you," Leia whispered, half still in tears and half angrily.

"I'm here now," Anakin said gently. "I can't erase the past. I wish I could. I've made everyone unhappy not just myself, most particularly your mother who didn't deserve it. I regret that bitterly."

"What changed you?" Leia asked curiously.

"Your mother's influence over all those years and then finally Luke; I'd rather die than allow him to," Anakin replied simply. 'I don't know why I didn't realize who you were,' he continued, talking almost more to himself now than to his daughter. "I kept seeing Padme as a teenager whenever I looked at you. It was such a struggle to treat you like a Rebel dissident although I know you won't believe it."

"I felt it," Leia admitted.

Anakin looked at her with a frown. "You did?" he said, startled.

Leia nodded slowly. "I could feel your reluctance. I don't know why but there was something about Darth Vader that touched me even though you were so completely terrifying too. I felt sorry for you. I think I could feel all your broken places even under all that armour."

Anakin stared at her. "You were using the Force," he said.

Leia shrugged. "I didn't know what it was but I struggled to hate you. I hated others who worked for you and it was easy but Darth Vader..." Leia paused and shook her head. "I felt just as conflicted about you as you did about me."

"I love you, Leia," Anakin said with tears in his eyes.

"I love you too, Daddy," Leia said, starting to cry again too and for the first time, she hugged her father.

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The process of setting up the new Senate was slow. It involved contacting the governments of each system (quite often puppet governments put in place by Sidious under the Empire's old regime) and getting them to elect a representative for the Galactic Senate. Of course, it created all sorts of problems within the individual system's governments as every government official in every system knew that the Senator that represented them in the Galactic Senate would be more powerful than any other person in their system. The resulting displays of ambition, both naked and subversive, were at once entirely predictable and shocking to Padme. Politicians were assassinated or suddenly had fatal 'accidents'. Usually, it was not the most capable person chosen but the most ruthless.

This was a result of only the most coldblooded individuals of any system being put into government by a brutal Empire. Padme did not agree with puppet governments for exactly this reason. The cream could not rise to the top, only the most dangerous and power-hungry.

There were many questions as to why the new Sith Lord, Darth Vader would even want a Galactic Senate after his predecessor had spent so much energy establishing an Empire.

Padme had to summon her best diplomatic acting ability to convince them that Darth Vader was interested in peace and thus wished each system to have its say in a Senate. The system governments were suspicious. Many believed the Senate would be as controlled by Darth Vader as the puppet governments the old Emperor had established. There was a feeling in the Galaxy that Vader only wanted a Senate in order to keep a closer eye on the systems. Padme knew this suspicion was only logical. She sighed to herself when she contemplated how long it would take to reestablish not just the functions of a democracy but also the spirit of and faith in a democratic system of government. She had a feeling that Darth Vader would need to 'disappear' completely before this process could really get underway. In the meantime, the new Senate would be filled with wary and subversive elements who believed the agenda of the new Senate was quite different to the ideal of democracy.

Setting up the new government also involved the setting up of sub-committees to plan and oversee the transition phase from Empire to Galactic Senate. As each system elected its official, this individual was immediately given a portfolio to manage.

All the systems were eager to have a representative very near the beginning stage and although early Senators tended to be assassinated by ambitious others in their system at an alarming rate, the Senate had functioning members from each system quite quickly. What was taking the time was sorting out the squabbling over the portfolios and the delineation of the responsibilities of the sub-committees.

Padme had to oversee each bill as it was put forward for both the transitional laws and the ones that would become permanent once the final functions of the Empire were handed over to the new Galactic Senate. At the same time, she had to keep the representatives from each system happy.

Padme made full use of those in the Rebel Alliance with both military and diplomatic training. They were given posts suitable to their skills, often replacing those that Sidious had appointed during his stranglehold on the Galaxy. In this way, Padme gradually weeded out those who had been faithful to Sidious and would be troublemakers under the new democratic system.

When Darth Vader had to make an appearance, Anakin would don his old mask and armour. Padme was so used to seeing it that it made no difference to her at all. Leia and Luke did not like it, however. They reacted differently to their father as Vader. It brought back too many unpleasant memories. Fortunately, Vader only rarely needed to show up after the initial phases. Once Vader had sent out a communiqué that his wife was managing the transition from the Empire to the Galactic Senate on his behalf and that she had been given full powers in his name, he rarely had to appear. He was free to assume his old name of Anakin Skywalker and spend his time reestablishing the Jedi Order. No-one ever guessed that Darth Vader and Anakin Skywalker was one and the same person. The only people privy to this secret was the original Rebel Alliance members who were sworn to secrecy and Anakin's own family.

Of course, there was a ripple of amazement that Darth Vader even had a wife. Apart from Sidious and some of Darth Vader's top men, no-one knew Padme existed. When a still-beautiful, perceptibly intelligent and accomplished woman who was obviously used to wielding power stepped forward to take over the reins of day-to-day administration, many were completely astonished. Most of them had thought of Darth Vader as more machine than

man. It was unthinkable that such a ruthless figure could love anybody. It was unthinkable that such a woman as Padme could love such a fearsome figure.

To prevent anyone making the connection between Darth Vader and Anakin Skywalker, Padme kept her maiden name of Padme Amidala for public purposes. There were still many in the Galaxy who recalled a beautiful young Senator named Padme Amidala from Naboo who had been Leader of the Opposition before the puppet Imperial Senate had come into being. Some even remembered that she had been pregnant just before she supposedly mysteriously died. Could it possibly be the same woman and could she have been Darth Vader's wife all that time? If it was the case, why had her death been faked? There was so much mystery surrounding Darth Vader's wife that it simply made them more suspicious of her efforts to reestablish a democracy.

One day after a particularly difficult meeting with representatives from hundreds of star systems, Leia found her mother sitting quietly in the old throne room of the Command Ship looking very grim. The room had been converted into a large meeting room but was now empty apart from Padme.

"What's the matter, mother?" Leia asked, going up to her and putting one hand on her shoulder. She had never seen her mother in this mood.

Padme looked down at her hands which were loosely clasped in her lap. "I sometimes feel like I've spent most of my life cleaning up the messes that your father has created," she said quietly, her gaze far away and her expression bleak, "once upon a time by writing the training for the Rebel Alliance and now by trying to reestablish the democratic process."

Leia gave a half smile. "Then your feelings would be correct," she replied.

"On days like this, I resent it. I'm tired. I'm nearly fifty Leia and I want time to enjoy my children. I want to go swimming every day if I want to and not have to worry about sorting out this huge chaotic and difficult situation," Padme said.

"You're very gifted mother. You know that old saying, 'to whom much is given much is expected'. It's always been that way for you since you were a young girl. The Galaxy needs you now particularly. Your enforced confinement drove you crazy, at least now your talents are being put to the best possible use," Leia said encouragingly.

"It's all the loss I resent the most. Having to win the trust of these systems all over again and having to teach them the ways of democracy," Padme paused and shook her head, "if the Sith had not been powerful for so long, the Galaxy would have not have to almost start from scratch again in ruling itself."

Leia sighed. "I suppose if Darth Sidious had not recruited father then it just would have been some other apprentice and probably the same thing would have happened anyway. At least this way, father did destroy the Sith even if he went entirely the wrong way about it. Maybe there was no other way to destroy Sidious — who knows? Now he can reestablish the Jedi and you, his wife, can reestablish democracy. I don't know if the Rebel Alliance would ever have been strong enough to overthrow the Sith. Perhaps only a Sith can destroy a Sith? Who ever really fully understands the way the Force works?"

"You sounded almost like Yoda then," Padme said with a slight smile. "Except he would have said, 'understand the way the Force works, who can?'" she joked weakly.

"Father is in almost daily contact with Yoda and Obi Wan now," Leia said musingly, glad her mother was distracted from the problems with the new Senate for awhile.

"I know — he keeps me pretty up-to-date with what is happening with the Jedi Order. Timing of both the reestablishment of the Senate and the Jedi Order will be crucial."

"There are a lot of powerful young men and woman out there, mother," Leia said, her voice giving away her excitement. "It will be a very exciting time when we are all together. Fetching them from all over the Galaxy and training them takes time but the more we find, the more electrifying it becomes."

"The sum of the Jedi is greater than its parts," Padme said with a smile.

"So it appears," Leia agreed.

Epilogue Part II

EPILOGUE — Part II

This is the life, everyone has to be somewhere

I am here

Just in a dream, the pressure of dreams is the killer of dreams

But it only gets harder

Time is the monster, all of us fight the same monster to win

I scream when I breathe, fear in that worry will trigger all my fears

It only gets harder, how'd I get so serious?

I am here, this is the life

— This is the Life, Wendy & Lisa

Anakin was not impressed to find out that Leia and Han Solo were now engaged. It had been less than a year since the Death Star and Darth Sidious had been destroyed and he now finally had the news he had been dreading.

“I don’t like Han Solo,” Anakin said to Padme the day of the announcement once back in their suite for the rest period.

“That’s obvious,” Padme said, “he doesn’t like you either.”

“That’s obvious too,” Anakin sneered.

“Well, you’re just going to have to accept it. It was inevitable,” Padme replied flatly.

“She’s better than a pirate!” Anakin said sullenly. “She was brought up royal; she’s a Jedi and a powerful force in the new Senate.”

“You’ve given Han enormous responsibilities since he destroyed the Death Star,” Padme protested mildly. “He’s met them all.”

“I actually just wanted to keep an eye on him,” Anakin said moodily, pacing up and down the suite.

Padme tried to hide a smile. It would not do to remind Anakin that she had come from an aristocratic family and he had been a slave. She found the irony and Anakin’s hypocrisy very amusing.

“You just don’t like him,” Padme said. “There’s nothing wrong with him, it’s just that you don’t get along.”

“Why can’t she marry one of the new Jedi we’ve found and are training?” Anakin asked irritably. “There are several good men among them.”

"Jedi aren't supposed to marry," Padme pointed out.

"I can't very well enforce that with a wife of my own, can I?" Anakin replied impatiently. "Very few may know you're really my wife now but it won't be that way forever."

"True," Padme agreed. "But anyway, she's more powerful than any of them. Only Luke is her equal and you her superior in the Order at present."

"I know and that won't change either, not in this generation," Anakin said, still pacing and frowning. "But it doesn't matter if whoever she chooses isn't as skilled as her."

"Do any of them want to marry her?" Padme countered. "After all, she'd be a bit of a handful," she added dubiously.

"It didn't stop me marrying you," Anakin said darkly.

Padme gave him a look. "Well, I'm not going to make myself unhappy about the inevitable," she finally said with a shrug.

"I can't bear to think of that... that... prat touching my daughter," Anakin said viciously.

"I'm sure he's been touching her for a long time already so I'd get over it if I were you," Padme said bluntly.

Anakin shot her a filthy look which Padme met with a cool, amused gaze. "They are grown ups, you know. You were already married by their age."

"I don't have to like it," he said moodily, throwing himself down next to Padme on a couch.

"Just smile in the wedding holograms," Padme said with a laugh that succeeded in soothing him just slightly.

After eighteen months of factional wars and assassinations in the new Senate, Anakin decided that they both needed a break.

"You've barely spent any time off the Command Ship or in the new Galactic Capital," Anakin mentioned one night over dinner.

Padme shrugged. "After fifteen years of being confined to just a few large rooms, I still can't get used to being able to go just anywhere. Besides, if I turn my back for an instant there is always some uproar among the systems."

"I think we need a holiday right away from both the new Jedi Order and the new Senate," Anakin said pointedly.

Padme's interest was caught. Anakin was such a workaholic that it surprised her to hear him speak of a thing like a holiday. "You and I never have enough time alone," Anakin added meaningfully. "Even in all the years you were cooped up here, I never had enough time to spend with you."

Padme smiled at him. He was still a romantic after all this time. That side of him had not altered at all from when he was still a Padawan. "Where do you want to go?" she asked.

"I think we should go back to the lakes at Naboo," Anakin said quietly.

Padme put her fork down slowly and stared at him. She had deliberately not gone back once she was finally free to do so. She was afraid to find her family gone and perhaps that it had changed completely in the past sixteen or so years. She wanted to remember it as it was. She had always found an excuse not to go back there. There was always something too important to miss happening in the new Senate.

"Everything is the same?" she asked unevenly.

"I managed to trace your family. I'm sorry, Padme but your father had recently died. Your mother and sister Sola are still alive and well," he said gently, reaching across to touch her arm.

"I didn't have the courage to try and find them," Padme whispered, looking away.

"No, you were afraid it would be one more thing to hate me for," Anakin said flatly, his face tense and his lips compressed.

Padme lifted her chin and looked at him, and then away again. He was right. It was exactly what she had been afraid of.

"I thought we could stay at the lakes again, like we did when you were in hiding," he said persuasively.

"I could swim again, and see mother and Sola," Padme said softly, her large eyes looking dreamy.

"Leia can handle the Senate for a couple of weeks and Luke is capable enough to oversee the new Jedi recruits," Anakin said encouragingly.

Padme looked at Anakin thoughtfully. "When do we leave?" she asked.

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Their two weeks on Naboo were bliss. All three women broke down crying when they saw each other again and hugged like they would never let go. It made tears come to Anakin's eyes too.

Her mother and Sola were curious about Anakin. Their marriage had been a secret even from Padme's own family all those years ago so they had no idea who he was. Padme simply told them that he was her husband. "I can't tell you who he is, mother. It would be dangerous," she said simply. They had to be satisfied with that.

Padme swam every day, sometimes on her own and sometimes with Sola. Sola's husband, Darred Janren was there too. Fortunately, he got on well with Anakin so there was no tension to mar the holiday.

"I'd forgotten what sunshine and water on my skin felt like," Padme admitted to her sister. "Being back here is like coming back from the dead," she said and then realized that for Sola and her mother, it was like that too. They had both thought her funeral was a real one all those years ago.

"It was awful after your funeral, Padme," Sola had replied quietly. "Mother never really was the same again. Her beautiful, clever, successful daughter was gone. I wasn't much compensation," Sola said more sadly than bitterly.

"Sola! You were part of the diplomatic circle on Naboo too. You just chose to not run for office," Padme scolded. "You never wanted a public life and if you had, you would have been Queen of Naboo for a term as well."

"I didn't like to lead," Sola admitted. "There were too many hard decisions to make."

"Yes," Padme sighed and then with a sudden grin, splashed Sola with an armful of water.

"You'll pay for that," Sola threatened as Padme swan away quickly with a laugh.

Anakin made sure that the bulk of Padme's time was spent alone with him. They went walking back over the grassy plains they had played on as a young man and woman, barely out of their teens.

"I can't believe it looks just the same," Padme said, staring off into the blue hills on the horizon as they sat in the long grass.

"So do you," Anakin said, staring at her in that old way he had all those years ago on Naboo. It still made her feel self-conscious and uncomfortable. She was annoyed with herself. She should be able to handle that look by now. She was fifty, for goodness sake!

"Even the grey hair?" Padme replied with a smile.

"You hardly have any! I've got more than you now. It's not fair!" Anakin complained.

Padme laughed at him. "Look on the bright side, you've still got a great body," she teased, looking at him from under her long eyelashes.

He grinned at her and wrestled her to the ground for a kiss as she laughed. "What isn't mechanical," he said ruefully when he finally came up for air. "Keeping up with Luke keeps me fit now. Tomorrow, let's go to those hills for the day. I remember them from all those years ago but I've never been there," he said pointing at them and letting her sit up again.

"I've never been there either," she admitted.

He put one arm around her still-slender waist. "Is it a date?" he asked.

"It's a date," Padme said and leaned her head against his shoulder.

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A few months later, Padme visited the new Jedi Temple which was still under construction nearly two years on. It would be even larger and more beautiful than the last one. Luke now had his own Padawan in young Moe who was not even fifteen yet. The two were constantly together.

Padme was just in time to see Luke and Leia have a practice duel.

"One can't defeat the other," Anakin said to Padme in a low voice, watching them carefully as he stood with his arms crossed over his chest. "It's good practice for both of them to regularly duel with someone who is their equal."

The light sabres moved so fast that Padme could barely follow their moves. Leia's was a strong purple colour, rather like Mace Windu's had been. Luke's was a cool blue colour, like Obi Wan's old light sabre.

Leia wore the Jedi trousers and tunic for training. "I can hardly wear my ceremonial dresses when training, can I? How can you do high jumps over people's heads in a dress?" Leia had once said to her mother.

"Is Leia to have a Padawan soon?" Padme asked.

"Yes, I have a young girl of about fourteen who will be ready for a master next year. Her name is Jambulani," Anakin replied. Anakin nodded to a young teenaged girl practicing in a corner with Moe. She had skin as black as deep space, long elegant bones and carried her shapely head like a Princess.

"She's beautiful," Padme said.

"More to the point, she has enormous potential. She's very powerful. She is a princess of her race," Anakin said giving the girl a brief, keen look but his eyes went back to his son and daughter dueling almost immediately.

"You can tell," Padme replied, still watching Jambulani. "Hopefully the Senate will have calmed down by next year," Padme added with a sigh.

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Three years pass....

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"It's time for Darth Vader to disappear," Anakin said to his wife one evening. "Within three months, the transitional laws will pass out of use and the permanent laws will be in place. There will be no need for Vader's presence in the Galaxy any longer."

"I think we should leave it until only a few days before," Padme said cautiously. "The rogue systems will have too much time to cause disruption if they are given much more than a few days."

"We'll have to plan it carefully," Anakin agreed.

Nearly three months after their conversation, Darth Vader was reported missing in action in an obscure part of the Galaxy. A few days later, his body was found in a transport that had obviously been shot down on a remote planet in a hostile sector of the Galaxy. No-one had seen or heard anything.

Anakin watched the news holograms come through and felt that a part of himself had indeed died — the worst part. To stage Darth Vader's death, he had sent a rebellious Commander out to the planet where Darth Vader had just been found. The Commander had been involved in plots against Padme, still clinging to his glory days as a General under the old Emperor. He would tolerate the Commander's very real threat to his wife's safety no longer. Rather than have him imprisoned or executed, he decided his Commander would perform one last service. It would be his body that would be found in Darth Vader's clothes and mask.

It was Anakin himself who shot down the Commander's transport. The Commander died from a head injury on impact. Anakin dressed him in his old armour and set fire to the Commander's body to ensure that no-one would recognize him. The mask and helmet were fairly fire resistant. Just enough twisted metal would be left of both to identify the corpse as Darth Vader but not enough flesh to identify the man in the mask.

The Galaxy was in shock but the new Senate seemed to calm down considerably after the event. It was as though they finally realized that they were no longer a puppet Senate and their powers would be very real after all. Padme's job suddenly and unexpectedly became much easier. The following year she would step down as Chancellor and a new one would be elected. She had offered to step down as soon as the permanent laws came in but they had asked her to stay on for another year. She would be relieved to give the responsibility away. It would give her more time with her family including her mother and Sola.

She felt strange when she saw the news holograms of Darth Vader's burnt body. She knew it wasn't Anakin in the armour, he was standing right next to her but it was as though an important part of her life was put to rest once and for all. It was a part she was glad to see the last of.

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One year passes....
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Padme left the Senate on her last day to thunderous applause. She had been asked to stay on again but the memory of Palpatine and how he had clung to power prevented her from giving in to their pressure. It was time for new blood.

That night, Anakin toasted her in their suite.

"You can marry me now," he said rather smugly. "With Darth Vader gone for over a year, it would be okay for our relationship to be public. Everyone thinks Luke and Leia are just my children, so we could be a family now and they could call you 'mother' in front of other people."

"What if I don't want to marry you?" Padme had teased, rolling her large brown eyes at him.

"We've already been through all that," Anakin said. "I'll just make you, remember?" he smirked.

Padme rolled her eyes at him again. "Let's not go there. I am a bit tired of all the sneaking around," she admitted. "We could live near the Temple. The Senate wants me to act in an advisory capacity. I have every intention of slacking off," she stated unapologetically.

"I think you've earned the break over the past five or six years," Anakin agreed. "I could use some help with the Temple though. I'm so busy training Younglings that I don't have time for the administration."

"Perhaps," Padme said noncommittally. "I may prefer to go swimming every day instead," she added flippantly.

"Are you a woman or a fish?" he asked in exasperation.

"I'm a grandmother or soon to be," Padme said pointedly. "Grandpa," she added rudely.

"That child better not be like Han," Anakin said, just about crushing the glass in his hand as he thought of his son-in-law.

"Hopefully he or she will be another great Jedi," Padme said quietly. "We need all the talented ones we can get. We need to find a wife for Luke," Padme added with a scheming look on her face.

"He's under threat," Anakin said, almost to himself. He instantly felt sorry for his clumsiness in bringing it up when he saw Padme's white face.

"What do you mean?" she asked instantly.

"There is a woman strong with the Force who is looking for him to kill him," Anakin admitted with a sigh. "I don't know her name but she was one of the Emperor's 'Hands'."

"Doesn't she know that Darth Sidious is dead?" Padme asked with a cold shiver.

"He still controls her by the Force from the Other Side," Anakin explained seriously. "This isn't something I can help Luke with. He will have to face her one day."

"Can't you find her and kill her?" Padme asked.

"It's not the Jedi way," Anakin said gently. "We only act defensively, not aggressively."

"It's never stopped you before," Padme said bitterly and got up from the table to go to the portals.

"Padme, I don't want to go back to my Sith ways. Not even for Luke. He wouldn't want me to anyway," Anakin explained softly.

Padme looked back at him over one slim shoulder, her curls falling over the silky skin of her back. "No, he wouldn't," she acknowledged reluctantly after a long pause.

Anakin came over and stood behind her, placing his large hands on her fragile shoulders.

"Will the threats to our happiness never end?" Padme asked angrily.

"We're a special family, Padme. The Force has been generous to all of us in our talents and opportunities. That makes us targets," Anakin said.

"Thank goodness Moe and Jambulani are nearly ready for the trials now," she said stiffly.

"Yes," Anakin agreed.

— — —

Anakin Skywalker and Padme Amidala were 'married' in a public ceremony on Coruscant near both the new Jedi Temple and new Galactic Senate Capital. A huge number of the city's inhabitants turned out to cheer the couple. They all agreed that Padme was far better off with the Jedi Master than with her former husband, Darth Vader. There was much comment on the irony of her choosing two men on such separate ends of the old Jedi religion, however.

Luke and Leia were there serving as attendants. Luke was grinning all over his face and Leia was heavily pregnant. Han was on hand to help her throughout the day when she got

tired.

The couple went on their ‘honeymoon’ to Naboo where they met up with Padme’s mother and Sola eventually too.

“How long do you want to stay?” Anakin had asked his ‘bride’ on the way there after taking off from the deafening cheers on Coruscant.

“I would say forever but that’s impractical. You have new recruits to train,” Padme sighed.

“A month?” Anakin asked.

“Can you be away for that long?” she asked surprised.

“Luke and Leia can handle things while I’m away. Leia will be taking over as Head of State of the Republic after the baby is born so now is the perfect time,” Anakin replied. “I love having talented children,” he said smugly.

Padme laughed and then shook her head in wonder. “It feels like a brand new day,” she said softly and smiled as she saw Naboo come into view.

THE END

Letter to Readers

Dear Readers,

I just wanted to take the opportunity to say ‘thank you’ for reading along, particularly to those who made the time of offer encouragement, constructive criticism and great ideas in the their reviews. You are all appreciated more than I can say. Special thanks to those who reviewed regularly — it was lovely to see your names pop up all the time.

I don’t know whether all my readers realized it (certainly a few of you did) but this story was not about redeeming Anakin, it was written to save Padme from an ending that I could just not believe in. For a Queen, a warrior and a Senator to simply ‘lose the will to live’ because her husband turned Sith was an absurdity to me (sorry George!). I had to re-write the ending, I couldn’t leave it the way it was. To be honest, I find Anakin deeply annoying but Padme is someone who I wish I was more like. I couldn’t just leave her there on her funeral pyre, it was such a waste.

Unfortunately, I’ve known too many psychopaths in my time not to know that they are rarely redeemed in real life. Thank goodness for poetic license! One thing was for sure, I could not redeem Anakin quickly and believe in the story myself — hence the long timeframes.

I’ve found everyone’s encouragement along the way just so heartening and it’s given me a boost of confidence in my writing, so thank you to all of you for that gift.

May the Force be with you.

Elizabeth.